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Seeking the Desert in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*

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The quest for solitude in the *Vita Columbae* (*V. Col.*)* can doubtless be studied under several different aspects. Here I wish to discuss a few points only from a broadly historical perspective. The strictly archaeological implications that discussion of these points undoubtedly raises have not been addressed here explicitly.

The ascetic and anchoritic life in *V. Col.* appears to fall into two broad divisions. First, there are those who, alone or in groups, live probably close to and directly dependent on a larger cenobitic monastery. Second, there are those who seek the 'desert in the ocean'. I shall review these two divisions in reverse order.

The Desert in the Ocean

Adomnán's voyager is typically Cormac Ua Liatháin, 'nepos Lethani'. Cormac's three unsuccessful attempts to find a desert in the ocean, 'herimum in ociano, desertum in pilago', are described in *V. Col.* 1.6 (first voyage) and 2.42 (second and third). In 1.6, though he himself is 'uir sanctus', he fails because one of his companions has not obtained his abbot's permission before joining him.[1] In his second voyage, he eventually reaches Orkney, where he escapes death through Columba's previous prophetic intercession on his behalf with the Pictish overking Brude, who has both the Orcadian subking and that king's hostages to hand. Columba refers to Cormac and his crew as 'some of our people' ('aliqui ex nostris'). Cormac subsequently returns to Iona at short notice, rejoining the surprised and thankful community in the church ('oratorium'). In his third voyage, his

* The edition normally used here is A.O. and M.O. Anderson (ed. and trans.), *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (Oxford, 1991).

ship is blown northwards for a fortnight until it enters a region of monstrous dangers. The distant but clairvoyant saint and the community pray with and for their brothers ('fratres'), their fellow members ('commembres'). A north wind is duly granted and Cormac returns and meets Columba 'face to face' ('facie ad faciem'), to the great wonder and joy of all.

Several points occur to me. First, these voyages all end in failure. Common sense might reasonably object, of course, that for *V. Col.* they had to do so, if the stories were to have more than just a beginning: successful permanent settlement in the wilderness of the sea might well have removed the occupants from all outside knowledge indefinitely or for ever. The failure of Cormac's first voyage, on the other hand, is explicitly attributed to an act of religious disobedience: that of the other two may similarly have been thought to result from religious considerations, though such is not stated. Second, it is noticeable that, not only do abbot and community continue to show concern for the voyagers, but also the abbot seems to retain overall responsibility for them as his monks. Third, the wanderer's return and the way in which his reintegration into the community is noted may be significant. At the end of his second voyage, Cormac rejoins the community at its heart – in the church. At the end of his third voyage, he and Columba are reunited so as to see each other with an immediacy forcefully expressed – 'facie ad faciem'.[2] Cormac's quests are an extension but still an integral part of the spiritual life of the community. These considerations lead me to suggest that such voyages were, frequently if not usually, seasonal; that they were undertaken for purposes of periodic retreat as much as, possibly more than, permanent withdrawal; and that they fail for spiritual, so internal, rather than for external and physical reasons. (This argument would be strengthened if Cormac's landfall in Orkney 'after some months' ['post aliquot menses'] and his return to Iona 'after an interval of a few months' ['post aliquantum paucorum interuallum mensium'] are one and the same period of time. If, however, Adomnán intended consecutive periods, the argument is weakened – unless such voyages could legitimately extend to more than a few months.)

Such periodic retreat is, admittedly, not mentioned explicitly in *V. Col.* (Columba's solitary hours apart in 2.26, 3.8 and 3.16 are not pertinent); but that it was practised at Iona by the early seventh century is surely indicated by Bede's reference to Bishop Aidan's occasional solitary retirement to Farne Island.[3] It is possible, I think, that Hinba functioned in this way for Columba. He visits the island five times in *V. Col.* (1.21, 2.24, 3.5, 3.17 and 3.18). The three latter occasions are, moreover, settings for visions or

manifestations of heavenly light. It has to be said, though, that only one of these is strictly religious in content: in 3.18 Columba is the ecstatic recipient of divine illumination while remaining alone in a locked house for three days and three nights. In 3.5, though the saint is favoured by angelic visitations (on three successive nights), their purpose is more mundane – the ordination of Aedán mac Gabráin as king of Dál Riata. While in 3.17 it is Brendan of Clonfert who sees a fiery nimbus about Columba's head as the saint celebrates Mass in the church ('eclesia'). Hinba had, on the other hand, in addition to the cenobitic monastery (1.45), the church of which is presumably the 'eclesia' of 3.17, a 'place of anchorites' ('locus anchoritarum', 3.23: see further below).

In contrast, Columba is never represented as visiting his monastery of Campus Lunge in Tiree; and there is no suggestion of formal retreat, for however long or short a period, on Iona itself. Such or similar seasonal or intermittent activity from a permanent base elsewhere may also underlie Bede's uncensorious account of the cause of friction between the Irish and the English monks on Inishbofin, which induced Bishop Colmán to found Mayo for the English.[4] It seems to be reflected, for the late eighth century, by Dicuil's acount of Irish 'clerici' visiting 'Thule' (probably Iceland) from 1 February to 1 August.[5] It may also explain, at least in part, the minimal geographical framework within which these ascetics move in *V. Col.* Cormac's first voyage starts from Erris in Co. Mayo, 'lying beyond the river Mód [Moy]' – perhaps symbolizing for Adomnán the far west.[6] His second reaches Orkney, possibly symbolizing likewise the far north; but also, I suspect, suggested to Adomnán by his knowledge of the devastation of the islands carried out by the Pictish overking, Brude son of Bile, in 682, during his own abbacy.[7] This might account for the details of the Orkney subking and hostages for his good behaviour at the court of an earlier Brude, Columba's Pictish royal contemporary. There are no other topographical points of reference. In sum, I believe that, in the view of Adomnán as abbot as well as author, seeking solitude, in the ocean or elsewhere, was (actually or ideally) a more structured and disciplined activity than that exemplified by the three Irishmen brought to King Alfred of Wessex in 891, to whom Sharpe draws attention. These 'Scottas' set sail from Ireland in a hide-covered boat without oars, in self-imposed exile for love of God, to be carried anywhere. They had food for seven days; and at the end of that time made land in Cornwall and came to King Alfred.[8] The older and freer spirit of, for example, Cassian's Paphnutius, 'the Buffalo',[9] or, even more, of Sulpicius Severus' wandering 'anachoretae', likewise Egyptian,[10] had

probably had its wings clipped progressively as monastic organization and institutionalization developed and became more complex generally.

The case of Báitán (1.20) seems rather different. He, like Cormac, sets out 'with [the] others' ('cum ceteris') to seek the desert in the ocean ('desertum marinum, in ociano; in mari herimum'). On setting out, he asks for Columba's blessing, but the saint prophesies of him that he 'will not lie buried in a desert place, but will be buried in that place in which a woman will drive sheep across his grave' ('non in deserto conditus iacebit, sed illo in loco sepelietur ubi oues femina trans sepulchrum eius minabit'). Báitán's quest also fails and, returning to his native district, he is head there for many years of a small church ('cellula'). On his death, he is buried in Derry, where Columba's prophecy is shortly afterwards fulfilled. Both Columba and Adomnán seem reserved about Báitán, though it seems reasonable to suppose that he was a Columban monk. Columba is not actually said to bless him, but gives (instead?) the rather arresting prophecy about him. It is noteworthy that there is a clear implication in Adomnán's narrative that Báitán *did* intend to find a place of permanent retreat and finally to be buried there. He fails despite 'long circuitous voyaging through windy seas' ('post longos per uentosa circuitus equora'). It is scarcely to be credited that, in purely practical terms, he could not have found somewhere suitable to his purposes eventually; and, so, hard to avoid the conclusion that he fails, in the eyes of the narrator, because he is overreaching himself spiritually. It seems to me that, either he is regarded as unfit for such an undertaking, or he is undertaking the venture for the wrong reasons (escapist tendencies?), or Adomnán disapproves of the venture itself (or possibly for all or some of these reasons). If so, his fault is apparently not disobedience: it is perhaps rather spiritual pride combined with a certain mediocrity. The banality of the lay intrusion upon his grave and the purely secular violence of the attendant circumstances may be intended to convey the same message – a message possibly also emphasized by the fact that (though Adomnán himself nowhere shows any sign of clerical misogyny) the intruder is a woman.

Adomnán's vocabulary here does not seem definitely specialized or technical. Latin 'desertum' was borrowed into early Irish ('dísert', 'solitary place', hence 'retreat, hermitage'), becoming both lexical item and toponym;[11] 'eremus' (Greek 'erēmos') was not, so far as I know. The usage of *V. Col.*, however, does not seem to me to show conclusively that Adomnán had Irish 'dísert' specifically in mind for the objective of these quests as he wrote. Indeed, the fact that he appears to use 'desertum' and 'herimus' indifferently suggests that he did not. It is perhaps worth noting the Latin usage among

his more important near contemporaries. Muirchú uses 'desertum' to mean basically 'uninhabited, waste land' (1.2, 1). Tírechán has 'because I am alone in a solitary church, a church deserted and empty' ('quia solus sum in aeclessia in diserto, in aecclessia relicta ac uacua') – possibly referring to the tomb (16, 9); 'He proceeded through the waste lands of Cíarrige Airni . . .' ('Perrexit per diserta Cerrigi Airni . . .' 33, 1); 'And he came through the waste lands of the Sons of Énde . . .' ('Et uenit per diserta filiorum Endi . . .' 34, 2); 'And he went to the well of Stringell in the waste lands . . .' ('Et exiit ad fontem Stringille in disertis . . .' 37, 1).[12]

The contexts seem largely non-ecclesiastical. Cogitosus has Brigit call the hermit Conleth 'from the wilderness and his life of solitude' ('de eremo et de sua vita solitaria'), and has a fox escape 'to wild desert places' ('ad loca deserta et silvestria').[13] Earlier, Columbanus (†615) had sought the advice of Pope Gregory the Great about monks who may 'flee to the deserts' ('ad deserta fugiunt': see note 1). In Letter II he writes to a Frankish synod, 'For if it is of God that you should drive me hence from the place of seclusion, which I have sought from overseas for the sake of my Lord Jesus Christ . . .' ('Nam si ex Deo est, ut me hinc de loco deserti, quem pro domino meo Iesu Christo de trans mare expetivi, propellatis . . .').[14] And in Letter III, writing again to a pope, he maintains the independence of the Gallo-Frankish hierarchy of himself and his companions 'dwelling in seclusion' ('in desertis sedentes').[15]

The reference in all three instances seems more explicitly ecclesiastical than either Muirchú's or Tírechán's usage generally; yet it does not seem to me a probable conclusion that early Irish 'dísert' in any specialized or technical sense underlies Columbanus' Latin. In a brief discussion, Kenney associated the development of the "dísert" as an institution both spiritual and material with the eighth- and ninth-century reform movement and the Céli Dé.[16] Flanagan, discussing the term as toponym, observed that "'Dísert" names are not documented in the annals before the ninth century; this would suggest that the major 'dísert' sites, at least, did not relate to the earlier phase of Christianisation'. She was, however, prepared to envisage the possibility that 'the "dísert" settlement concept (and presumably the potential deployment of the generic "dísert") began at an earlier stage with the primary meaning of "hermitage" and had by the eighth to ninth century developed a somewhat more specialised connotation, while retaining the essence of "a place apart"'.[17] The chronological development of 'dísert', in the specific sense of 'hermitage, retreat', leading to its application to a particular kind or particular kinds of ecclesiastical community or settlement, merits further systematic investigation. It may be convenient, in the first

instance, to distinguish its use as lexical item from its use as toponymic generic in names such as Dísert Diarmata (Castledermot, Co. Kildare – Annals of Ulster [AU] 842.11, 843.5, 876.1, etc.), or 'Dísert Ciaráin' (Castlekieran, Co. Meath – AU 857.2, 870.5). Its eventual use, on the other hand, to denote dependent hermitages, discussed briefly below in relation to Iona, suggests that too rigid a distinction would in practice almost certainly be misleading.

What *is* certain is that, in *V. Col.*, Adomnán never calls his ascetic voyagers 'anchorites'.

Dependent Hermitages

Explicit reference to anchorites or the anchoritic life occurs in two contexts only. Adomnán cites (*V. Col.* 1.49) as his own source for the fulfilment of a prophecy of Columba, one Finán, 'who for many years lived irreproachably the life of an anchorite [qui uitam multis anchoriticam annis . . . inreprae-hensibiliter ducebat], beside the monastery of the plain of the oakwood [iuxta roboreti monasterium campi]' – Durrow. Shortly after Columba's death (*V. Col.* 3.23), one Virgno crossed from Ireland to Hinba, where he remained for the rest of his life. After many years of cenobitic life 'among the brothers' ('inter fratres'), Virgno lived twelve years more, 'leading the life of an anchorite, in the place of the anchorites' ('in loco anchoritarum . . . uitam ducens anchoriticam'), in Muirbolc már. Supervised progression of an individual from the cenobitic to the anchoritic life was already the usual, or at least the recommended, practice of those parts of Egypt that Cassian knew.[18] I think it as likely, therefore, that Finán had been previously a member of the cenobitic community of Durrow as that he had attached himself to Durrow of his own volition.[19] As abbot of a cenobitic monastery and administrator, Adomnán may have recognized this formally defined relationship of community and solitary as the anchoritic life strictly so called: he may have preferred it to other permissible forms of solitary endeavour as tending to promote good (manageable) order. If that were the case, then Adomnán's anchorites, in contrast with what I have suggested for his voyagers, withdraw indefinitely or permanently, not seasonally.

The habitations of such as Finán and Virgno in relation to a supporting cenobitic monastery can eventually be one aspect of 'dísert' as physical settlement and toponym. A good example is provided by Iona itself, where Cladh an Díseirt, 'burial-ground of the hermitage', comprising the footings of a possible chapel (probably of twelfth century or later date) within a

walled or embanked enclosure, lies about 400 metres Northeast of the abbey (about 275 metres Northeast of the line of the northern boundary of the early medieval monastic enclosure).[20] The 'dísertach', Mac Gilla-duib, is named among dignitaries of the community of Iona in 1164.[21] Dysert Church, on the outskirts of Ardmore in Co. Waterford, is the Díseart Decláin of the Irish Life of St Declan.[22] In *V. Col.*, however, Finán's cell or its site is not actually mentioned; Virgno retires, not to a 'desertum', but to a 'locus anchoritarum': once again, Adomnán gives no clear hint in these two instances of the existence at this date of a developed Irish technical vocabulary of the anchoritic life, especially as regards early Irish 'dísert'.[23]

Two Individual Cases

Adomnán's outlook does not, on the other hand, appear to be uncompromisingly rigid or exclusive where individual ascetic effort is concerned. In *V. Col.* 3.7, Columba sees in a vision the soul of a cleric ('clericus') named Diormit being carried to heaven by angels. This man, described as 'beatus homo' and as 'Christi milito', had 'constructed for himself a little monastery' ('sibi . . . monasteriolum construxit') in the region called ind Airthir in eastern Airgialla. The phrase recalls Sulpicius Severus' statement that St Martin 'made himself a hermitage at Milan' ('Mediolani sibi monasterium statuit').[24] Bede several times calls Cuthbert's hermitage on Farne 'monasterium'.[25] The use of the diminutive in *V. Col.* here may, therefore, have real significance: Diormit has established himself as a solitary, or perhaps as head of a small group of ascetics (or first as one, then as the other); and his spiritual credentials are clearly impeccable in Adomnán's eyes. (I would be less confident, however, that such is the implication of 'cellula' in 1.20, the 'small church' of which Báitán was 'dominus' for many years.)

In contrast, the 'great church of Deathrib' ('cella magna Deathrib') (*V. Col.* 1.50) need not, I think, have been an eremitical foundation originally.[26] Early Irish 'díthrub', certainly, like the borrowed 'dísert', can mean 'hermitage', but equally (again like 'dísert') it can mean simply 'uninhabited or solitary place, wilderness, retreat'.[27] This church is mentioned in a brief appendix to the account of Columba's reception at Coleraine following the meeting of kings at Druim Cett. Like Coleraine, which is both a monastery and a bishop's seat, the 'cella magna Deathrib' is clearly a centre to which the gifts of the neighbouring population can be brought in honour of the saint's visit: the church acts, therefore, as a focus for the surrounding countryside. Coleraine serves the district of Eilne: this church may likewise

serve a district called Díthrub, 'the Wilderness'. It is, I suggest, the chief church of that district – the 'cella magna', 'cell mór'. It may have been served by a community of some sort, as it was later;[28] but there is nothing, apart from the element 'díthrub', to indicate the possibility that it is eremitical in *V. Col.* I think it likely, therefore, that 'díthrub' here has no such connotation: that it is rather a (purely secular) territorial name, possibly already ancient when the church was founded and (since place-names tend to be conservative) no longer an accurate reflection of local conditions at that time. Clearly, the area was inhabited at the time of Columba's visit: its population was in all probability the primary objective of the church's foundation. The 'cella magna Deathrib', on this line of reasoning, is so called both because it serves Díthrub and to distinguish it from other (chief) churches called 'Cell Mór'.[29]

Peregrinatio[30] in V. Col.

Adomnán calls none of these ascetics 'peregrini' explicitly. Columba, however, had sailed from Ireland to Britain 'wishing to be a pilgrim for Christ' ('pro Christo perigrinari uolens' – second Preface, 4a), and his pilgrimage in Britain is referred to again in 1.7, 1.13; 2.10; 3.22, 3.23 (129b). It may reasonably be concluded, therefore, that those monks of Iona and its dependencies who, like Columba, lived in self-imposed exile for God outside their native territories were likewise 'peregrini'. Indeed, the British monk who is the first to die on Iona is actually called 'perigrinus' (3.6). This number would presumably include at least a proportion of the ascetics. 'Peregrinatio' was also open to laity as well as religious and could be undertaken for a definite period of time. In 1.32, two brothers wish to be pilgrims on Iona 'for this year' ('hoc anno'): there is no automatic obligation to proceed thence to monastic vows and there is general surprise when Columba so stipulates as a condition of their reception.

Clergy could also avail themselves of periodic 'peregrinatio': Bishop Crónán from Munster, travelling incognito as 'humilis perigrinus', fails to conceal his episcopal rank from Columba when it comes to the celebration of Mass (1.44). On the other hand, pilgrimage could lead to entry into monastic life, whether or not that was the original intention. In 1.2, we are told that St Fintén mocu Moie (Munnu) 'had in his heart, while still in the years of his youth, the purpose of leaving Ireland and going to our holy Columba, in order to live in pilgrimage' ('ut nostrum sanctum Columbam Heuerniam deserens perigrinaturus adiret'). It then transpires that he

wishes to become a monk of Columba, and this is the request he makes of Baithéne, Columba's successor, when he eventually reaches Iona. In 2.39, Librán comes from Connacht to Iona 'to expiate his sins in pilgrimage' ('ad delenda in perigrinatione peccamina', 87a). His penance for manslaughter apparently involves full participation in the monastic life of Campus Lunge in Tiree for seven years: but, though Librán has already assumed at least the outward appearance of clerical status, as a 'pilgrim penitent' ('penitens perigrinus', 88b) he is strictly excommunicate for the seven years; and it is not until he has been formally reconciled with the Church at the end of this time and has satisfied, with Columba's prophetic aid, the claims of secular justice and of family at home in Connacht, that he takes the monastic vow on Iona and is sent back to Campus Lunge as a monk. It is not clear, however, that such was his intention from the outset.

Librán is originally a fugitive from justice and his assumption of clerical dress – he is 'a certain layman who had recently put on clerical dress' ('homo quidam plebeus nuper sumpto clericatus habitu', 87a) – may, at least in part, have been designed to afford him a measure of legal status and protection on his travels. So it may be significant that the only other instance where clerical dress is mentioned in connection with a 'peregrinus' is in 1.36. Here the sanguinary Áid the Black is brought 'in clerical garb' ('sub clericatus habitu') by the priest Findchán to his monastery of Artchain in Tiree, Findchán 'intending that he should for some years be a pilgrim with him in his monastery' ('ut in suo apud se monasterio per aliquot perigrinaretur annos'). Subsequently, Áid is irregularly ordained priest and, in the upshot, returns to his former life of violence in the world and duly meets a violent end. One suspects, indeed, that Áid's motives in adopting pilgrim status, including clerical dress, and undergoing ordination were as cynical as Findchán's seem to have been naive in facilitating him. Áid, in other words, had his eyes fixed firmly on the potential worldly advantages that the combined status of pilgrim and priest might bring him.

The two 'peregrinae' seem to me to be slightly more problematical, since in both cases their 'peregrinatio' is entirely involuntary, considered in religious terms. The story of the storm-driven crane from Northwestern Ireland in 1.48 is, admittedly, didactic: the monastic duty of hospitality to pilgrims and guests is a paramount religious obligation, since Christ himself is personified in pilgrim guests ('Christum in peregrinis hospitibus', 2.20, B text). As in the case of Fintén (1.2, 12a) and the two brothers (1.32), the terms 'peregrinus' and 'hospes' are practically synonymous and here the crane is 'quaedam hospita grus' and 'peregrina hospita'. Nevertheless, the bird acts under compulsion; as

does, in different circumstances, Broichán's Irish slave-girl in 2.33, who is a 'pilgrim captive' ('perigrina captiua', 79b). In both cases, there is no question of personal choice, or personal responsibility for such choice, so there can scarcely be any question of spiritual merit being thus acquired, save by the monk of Iona as obedient host in the former case and by Columba as liberator in the latter. It may be simplest, with Sharpe, to see 'perigrina' in 2.33, at least, as denoting basically 'separation from one's homeland rather than pilgrimage'.[31] Adomnán's monastic usage, even so, is likely to have some religious colouring, even if not precisely defined in any legal or technical sense: 'advena ego sum apud te, Et peregrinus sicut omnes patres mei' (Psalm 38 (39): 13) – 'I am a stranger with you, and a nomad like all my ancestors'.[32]

In 3.7 we see what was probably a fairly unexceptional instance of temporary 'peregrinatio'. An Irish pilgrim ('quidam euerniensis perigrinus') comes to Columba in Iona and stays with him, 'for some months' ('per aliquot menses'). No more specific reason is given for his visit. He is described as 'frater' and seems to be regarded, by implication at least, as 'Christi milito' (when he says 'I know *another* soldier of Christ, etc.' – 'Alium Christi scio militonem'). He was probably, therefore, a religious. He comes from the district of ind Airthir.

There are, finally, a number of cases where the concept of 'peregrinatio' might have been invoked, but is not – explicitly at any rate. Columba's saintly visitors are perhaps to be regarded primarily – like himself, 'monasteriorum pater et fundator' ('the father and founder of monasteries', second Preface, 2a) – as traditional fathers of the sixth-century Irish Church: Cainnech of Aghaboe (1.4, 2.14), Colmán Elo (1.5, 2.15), Comgall of Bangor, Cainnech, Brendan of Clonfert, Cormac Ua Liatháin (3.17, who are indeed explicitly called 'four holy founders of monasteries' – 'iiii monasteriorum sancti fundatores'; I shall return to Cormac later).[33] Féchna (1.30), from Ireland, is 'sapiens' and 'penitens' and is referred to by Columba as 'proselytus', a term also applied, for instance, to the two brothers in 1.32 and to Bishop Crónán in 1.44; but he is not actually called 'peregrinus'. In 1.26, Áidán Fergno's son, 'a very religious man' ('uir ualde relegiosus'), 'who (it is said) for twelve years attended upon Brénden mocu Alti' (Brendan of Clonfert), is likewise 'proselytus', but not 'peregrinus'. The story is to an extent didactic: the customary Wednesday fast must be relaxed, for Áidán is a guest, if a 'disturbing guest' ('molestus hospes'), and must be received as such. But apparently he is not a pilgrim guest.

In sum, Adomnán's usage seems broad and is perhaps not precisely definable in any strict legal or technical sense. It does not seem safe, furthermore, to rest any great weight of argument on his silences.[34]

The Broader Context

I do not, of course, mean to deny categorically that there were permanent and independent anchorite settlements in the islands of the North Atlantic, possibly in Adomnán's day, probably during the course of the eighth century. Dicuil, writing *c.*825, provides some information on the colonization by Irish ecclesiastics of a group of small islands lying to the north of Britain – probably the Faeroes: for some time 'hermits sailing from our country, Ireland' ('heremitae ex nostra Scottia navigantes') have lived there. But now, 'because of the Northman pirates' ('causa latronum Normannorum'), they are 'emptied of anchorites' ('uacuae anchoritis'), and filled with sheep and sea-birds.[35] The ascetic settlers had presumably introduced sheep, perhaps primarily for their wool, and may have supplemented their diet with sea-birds and their eggs. Their settlement(s) collectively had lasted for about a century, it seems, before abandonment in the face of Viking activity. Some islands in the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland may similarly have been settled by ascetic groups or individuals.

On the other hand, as we have already seen, the clerical occupation of Dicuil's 'Thule' was seasonal, as I have suggested was the case with the voyaging of Cormac and those like him. The *V. Col.* narratives seem to imply, furthermore, that the same locations were not sought and reoccupied automatically on each separate occasion: was this the case in 'Thule' as well?

Adomnán's narrative, in the context of ascetic practice generally, lacks explicit detail, which he is clearly not concerned to give. As abbot of a major cenobitic community with a number of geographically scattered dependent houses both in Scotland and Ireland, he may have chosen deliberately to ignore the more spontaneous and individualist aspects of the desert tradition specifically, for the sake of collective discipline as he saw it. I have already suggested that, for him, an 'anchorite' properly so called was an individual trained in and still ultimately dependent on a 'cenobium'. But we are told nothing about the material circumstances of Finán's life beside Durrow (1.49); and, in the case of Virgno's 'locus anchoritarum' at Muirbolc már on Hinba (3.23), it is a moot point whether the genitive plural reflects one or more contemporary groups, or a succession of single solitaries as on Farne.[36] In the case of the voyagers, moreover, their activities are essentially subordinated to Columba's roles as abbot and prophet: they are not really presented as independent narratives in their own right.

I suspect, however, that Adomnán was at least aware of other traditions of the quest for the desert in the ocean. He may have inherited stories of

Cormac from earlier Iona tradition, or he may have cast him in the role of voyager for his own literary purposes. The anomalous appearance (I would argue) of Cormac in *V. Col.* 3.17, on the other hand, indicates to me the distinct possibility that Adomnán knew an early stage in the development of traditions of St Brendan as voyager, which eventually matured in the 'vitae' of the saint and the *Navigatio Brendani*. Cormac is named here as one of the four founders of monasteries who visit Columba in Hinba, but he then disappears entirely from the scene, and Brendan relates his vision only to Comgall and Cainnech. Later tradition associated Cormac with Durrow, but did not make him the founder of a church.[37] I suggest that Adomnán's intention here was to bring his voyager Cormac into direct contact with St Brendan of Clonfert, eventually the classic voyager of early Irish hagiographical tradition, but that Cormac had otherwise no integral role in the episode described in 3.17. If there is any merit in this suggestion, then the following observations may have some relevance to what Adomnán himself does say and apparently chooses not to say about the quest for the desert in the ocean.[38]

1. In *Vita Brendani* (*VB*), Brendan seeks a place of retirement, most explicitly described in S1, §4: 'terram secretam in mari ab hominibus semotam' ('a secret land in the sea remote from men'); and 'insulam amenissimam aptam servis Christi' ('a most delightful island suitable for [the] servants of Christ'), 'multumque sibi placentem' ('and greatly pleasing to him – Brendan'), (similarly *Vita Prima Brendani*, §12). In *Navigatio Brendani* (*NB*), on the other hand, the goal of his quest is the otherworldly 'terra repromissionis sanctorum' ('the promised land of the saints') (e.g. *NB* ch. 2).
2. In *VB*, he searches for five years unsuccessfully, then returns to Ireland and consults his foster-mother, St Íte. She attributes his failure to the fact that he seeks a sacred place in which human blood has never been shed in a boat covered with the skins of dead animals: as apparently with Cormac, the reason for failure is religious rather than mundane. She advises him to build a wooden boat and predicts his ultimate success. In this, his goal is attained after a further two years (*Vita Prima Brendani* §§71, 76; S2 §10 – cf. §11: 'terram paradiso similem' ('a land like paradise'). 'Christi prata, paradisumque inter undas maris' ('the meadows of Christ, and [a] paradise among the waves of the sea', *Vita Prima Brendani* §76). In *NB*, his search for the Land of Promise is continuous for seven years and ultimately successful in a skin-covered boat.
3. In *Vita Prima Brendani* §76 and S2 §11, Brendan expresses a desire to remain permanently in the island sought and found, but he is told firmly by the resident aged holy man whom he has met there that he must return to Ireland, where God has other plans for him. He is promised, however, that 'at the end of time your "reliquie" [primary relics?] will be brought to this island with your company ['familia'] . . . and this seven years before the day of the last judgement' (*Vita Prima Brendani*). Báitán in *V. Col.* 1.20 is promised not only that he will not be buried 'in deserto', but also that he will be buried 'in that place in which a woman will drive sheep across his grave' – and Báitán does not even find his 'herimus'. Brendan's spiritual wilfulness is clearly more apparent than real. By contrast, Báitán's seems the more likely a sustained sin against the light, in Adomnán's opinion.
4. A quite prominent motif of *NB* is that of letting the boat go where God wills: chs. 6, 8 (?), 12 (for three months), 14 (for twenty days), 26 (Paul the Hermit), 27 (for the whole of Lent); cf. 15, 16 (for forty days). In *VB*, conversely, the only reflection of this motif seems to be in *Vita Prima Brendani* §98 (cf. Paul the Hermit, *NB* ch. 26?). I have already suggested that Adomnán may have had his own reasons for ignoring the more outré expressions of ascetic devotion. If he was aware of this particular phenomenon, he may have viewed it additionally as much in a penal as in a penitential light.[39]

Such information as Adomnán provides in *V. Col.* on the desert tradition specifically, as it was articulated in those Scottish and Irish monasteries falling within the range of his own knowledge (directly or indirectly), and on ascetic activity in and around such communities more generally, is incidental and subordinated to his overriding concern to portray St Columba as saintly father and founder of monasteries, thaumaturge and visionary, ruling a possibly somewhat idealized community at Iona. Nevertheless, his literary testimony may be accepted as at least a genuine reflection of historical reality – certainly for his own day, quite possibly for Columba's also.