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The Eschatological Body: Fleeing the Centre in Pre-modern Insular Christianity and Post-modern Secularity

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‘The Eschatological Body’ examines the practice peregrinatio pro Christo among the Insular Christians living at the north-west edge of Europe in the early Middle Ages. The paper distinguishes this peregrinatio ex patria from the more conventional understanding of pilgrimage as peregrinatio ad loca, or destinationnal pilgrimage. It explores the theological and existential meanings of exile, foreignness, and home inherent in the practices, and suggests that for these Insular peregrini, the body becomes the dynamic ‘centre’ in decentred, itinerant lives awaiting the eschaton. The paper concludes by considering the possible links between this ancient practice and the postmodern notion of ‘existential migration’ as theorised by psychologist Greg Madoson.

Key Words: pilgrimage, pre-modern Christianity, Christian pilgrimage, peregrinatio, peregrinatio pro Christo, peregrinatio ex patria, peregrinatio ad loca, peregrini, destinationnal pilgrimage, Insular Christianity, Patrick, Columba, Columbanus, seafarer, Anglo-Saxon, existential migration, serial pilgrims, post-modern pilgrimage, secularism

Introduction

Between lines recording the efforts of Arnulf, King of East Francia, at the Battle of Leuven, and the death of an esteemed Irish teacher named Suibhne, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the year 891 notes the sea journey of three men from Ireland who ran aground at Cornwall. They landed high-and-dry not due to miscalculation or equipment failure but by the destiny to which they expressly gave themselves, setting off as they did in a skin coracle, sans rudder and sans oars.\[1\]

The chronicler deemed it remarkable enough to record, though he did so quite plainly and without apparent amazement or alarm:

And three Irishmen came to king Alfred in a boat without any oars, from Ireland, whence they had stolen away because they wished for the love of God to be on pilgrimage, they cared not where. The boat in which they set out was made of two and a half hides, and they had taken with them, provisions for a week and after a week they came to land in Cornwall, and soon went to King Alfred. Thus were they named: Dubhslaine and Macbeathadh and Maelinmhain.\[2\]

Figure 1: Initial page of the Peterborough Chronicle, also known as the Laud manuscript and the E-manuscript. A version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, dating from the 12th century.


In the context in which the text was written, the word translated above as ‘pilgrimage’ (elfiodigesse in the Anglo-Saxon) also denoted foreign travel, sojourn, or exile. Early Jesus movements adopted the notion of exile as existentially representative of the human condition, as numerous passages in the New Testament demonstrate. By the early Middle Ages a fully developed theology of estrangement from the heavenly patria had developed, linking biblical metaphor with the culture of movement of late antiquity, with its complex notions of civil and legal status, belonging and foreignness. From the late third century when Antony the Great moved out into the Egyptian Desert in response to the Gospel call of Jesus to follow him: ‘go, sell what you possess and give to the poor . . .’, significant numbers of Christians - more- or less-formally monastic - imitated the spiritual homelessness of their itinerant saviour and his disciples through bodily leave-taking and self-exile. This peregrinatio ex patria, or xeniteia in the Greek-speaking context, marked early monastic culture with a spirit of mobility and contingency, what Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony has called ‘an exodus toward self-transformation.’

In the Insular world at the north-west edge of Europe in the early Middle Ages, peregrinatio carried the double-sense of an intentional journey, this is, a literal leaving of one’s native country, and of an existential condition, that is, a state of spiritual alienation from the heavenly fatherland, which was the ultimate destiny of the human soul. Some Insular peregrini ex patria were monastic migrants who left home and settled humbly in foreign lands, leaving little or no historical trace; nothing further is known of the three who landed at Cornwall in 891, for instance. Others became beloved spiritual heroes lionised for ascetical virtuosity, intellectual prowess, and/or religious and cultural mission, such as the founders of the powerful monasteries of Iona and Lindisfarne, and the cleric-scholars at the Frankish courts. But all of these peregrini left their earthly homeland and social centre for the sake of a deeper existential home, centred effectively - albeit provisionally - in the itinerant body oriented transcendentally toward the eschaton.

A seventh century text in Old Irish and Latin known as the Cambrai Homily identifies this exilic pilgrimage as ‘white martyrdom,’ to wit: ‘when they part for the sake

2. G. N. Garmonsway, The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1972), 82; this text is a translation of the Parker Chronicle, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge MS 173. The Anglo-Saxon text as follows: ‘prie Scotia comon to Effrede cyninge, on anum bate butan elicm gerebrum of Hibernia, ponon hi bi bestelon forton þe hi woldon for Godes lufan on elfiodignesse beon, hi ne rohton hwear. Se hat wæs geworht of priddan healfræ hyde þe hi on foron, 7 hi namon mid him þeþ hi hæfdun to seofon nihtum mete; 7 þa comon hie ymb. vii. niht to londe on Cornwalum. 7 foron þa sona to Efredda cyninge; Pus hie weron genemnde, Dubslane 7 Maccebethu. 7 Maelinmun,’ Smith, Parker Chronicle, 40.
5. That monasticism in early Christianity was a fluid and, in some expressions even anarchic, phenomenon is sometimes obscured by the subsequent prevalence of the Benedictine Rule, which normalised stability of place within Western monasticism, and explicitly condemned monastic wandering. See Maribel Dietz, Wandering Monks, Virgins, and Pilgrims: Ascetic Travel in the Mediterranean World, A.D. 300–800 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 5-6.
of God from everything that they love.\[7\] This is pilgrimage not as journey to a sacred earthly centre, but rather pilgrimage as existential condition of transience. As witness to the innate ambiguity of human being, which ineluctably oscillates between stasis and movement, between now and to-come, between here and somewhere else, peregrinatio was purposefully directed into geographic, social, and psychic margins. The pilgrim's aspiration for arrival and centring is postponed in favour of departure and displacement. The only proximate destination is a spiritual horizon directed into geographic, social, and psychic margins. The pilgrim's aspiration for arrival and centring is postponed in favour of departure and displacement. The only proximate destination is a spiritual horizon into eternity.

I’d like to consider the de-centring practice of peregrinatio pro Christo as distinctive of the Christianity of Ireland and the British Isles in the early Middle Ages. I will retain the Latin terms ‘peregrinatio’ and ‘peregrini’ to distinguish Insular exilic migration and migrants from the more conventional sense of pilgrims as travellers to sacred centres. I have chosen the term ‘Insular Christianity’ to include what are often referred to separately as ‘Celtic,’ ‘British,’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ Christianity, or together as the more unwieldily (and still inadequate) ‘Hiberno-Saxon’ Christianity.\[8\] If insularity in the geographical sense tempts assumption of cultural insularity, it is important to remember that travel by water within and beyond the Atlantic Archipelago was often easier, and almost certainly faster than trekking over land; indeed, evidence of water-borne mobility among and beyond these Isles dates back to the earliest periods of human habitation.\[9\] Contact among the Isles of the early medieval period (and with the wider world) is richly evidenced in the archaeology of trading centres in Cornwall, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland.\[11\]

Shared spiritual culture was inevitable given the intense interchange - economic, political, and cultural - between Christian Ireland and Britain. While Christianity initially travelled from Roman Britain to Ireland,\[12\] the direction of influence shifted after the withdrawal of Rome in the early fifth century. By the sixth century, Irish ‘saints and scholars’ were famously (and eventually infamously)\[13\] bringing their thought and practices to Britain and the Continent, and British and Anglo-Saxon monastics were travelling to study in Ireland. While the persistent notion of a unified or uniform Celtic or Insular Church pitted over and against a Roman Church has been solidly refuted,\[14\] there were nonetheless distinctive cultural continuities among the Christian inhabitants of Britain and Ireland. A strong penchant for peregrination was one of these.

Through primary texts in English translation, I will retrieve the discourse of foreignness and exile, and the eschatological desire for a transcendent home expressed by the Insular peregrini and by those who memorialised and theologised their acts of holy mobility. Attending carefully to the texts of peregrinatio is an ethical matter: we are in a sense hospites, both guests and strangers, in their worlds of religious meaning and it is incumbent on us to listen to them generously, even while reflecting critically. Without presuming to psychoanalyse across centuries, something of the theoretical and existential dimension of the Insular wanderers can be recovered in reading these texts.

Having listened to the voices of the past, I will then briefly conclude by considering a perhaps surprising resonance between the intensely religious practice of peregrinatio and a restlessness that psychologist Greg Madison has identified in secular postmodernity and has termed ‘existential migration.’ Based on his intensive research with a group of contemporary

8. The phrase ‘place of resurrection’ can be found in medieval Irish hagiography; see Esther de Waal, Every Earthly Blessing: Rediscovering the Celtic Tradition (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1999), 27, 40, 42.
10. Evidence of travel over water dating back at least the Mesolithic period along the Atlantic Seaboard is discussed in Barry Cunliffe, Britain Begins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 72-75.
12. And this certainly before the arrival of Palladius in Ireland who was sent in the year 431 by Pope Celestine, according to the Chronicle of Prosper of Aquitaine, ‘To the Irish believing in Christ’ (ad Scotos in Christum credentes); quoted in Diábhi Ó Cróinín, Early Medieval Ireland 400-1200 (London & New York: Longman, 1997), 14.
13. See below regarding grumblings amongst some of the Insular peregrini’s continental contemporaries.
voluntary migrants, Madison proposes that practices of mobility and self-chosen exile are properly expressive of a radical existential condition that haunts some people some of the time, and others much of their lives. Of people who recognise in themselves such a condition, including himself, he writes: ‘We are living paradoxes. We need to feel at home but have never done so, we need to belong but renounce opportunities for belonging, we venture into the unknown in order to experience the homecoming that will finally settle us, but doesn’t.’ Existential migration is ‘instigated by a powerful need to pursue one’s personal potential by maximising freedom, independence, and choice.’ Existential migrants ‘choose to make themselves foreigners,’ and, in choosing not to be at home, enact the desire for some deeper and elusive home to which to belong. For existential migrants, and I will suggest, also for the Insular peregrini, the locus of life’s meaning-making is shifted from a sacred earthly centre of belonging to a sacred decentred not-belonging. Their very bodily selves become their temporal centres; and arrival at ‘home’ is perpetually postponed through ongoing desire for a ‘true’ home always beyond the imagined - and perhaps imaginable - horizon.

**Pilgrimage as Centring and De-centring**

Both popular and scholarly construals of pilgrimage usually involve the notion of centripetal bodily movement toward a consecrated destination. In Christian tradition, the archetype is found in the medieval pilgrim journey that culminated in bodily arrival at a sacred centre, an axis mundi activated by the bodily traces of a holy hero. Arrival at the destination may involve ritual engagement with place and persons associated with it. Jenn Cianca’s preceding article uncovers the earliest roots of practices that ground this conventional understanding of pilgrimage in the Christian tradition, and the next piece by George Greenia presents the apotheosis of Western destinations of pilgrimage in his examination of medieval Christian religious journey. The Kumbh Mela in South Asian tradition and the Hajj in Islam also fit the pattern of pilgrimage as travel vectored toward a sacred centre, as do apparently secular journeys to such places as legendary battlefields and graves of beloved artists and entertainers. Even the micro-pilgrimage offered by the increasingly popular practice of labyrinth walking is movement toward a specific somewhere, typically located in the centre of the winding path.

Destinational pilgrimages are not simply destination-centred, however: they are doubly centred. Barring unexpected circumstances or events on the way, a return journey from a sacred centre is part of the conventionally-understood pilgrimage pattern, and the return is typically a return to a quotidian centre, that is, a return home. Victor and Edith Turner assumed this when they appropriated Arnold Van Gennep’s tripartite rites-of-passage structure of separation - limen - re-aggregation to chart the conventional pilgrimage process. The phases of separation and liminality indicate a withdrawal from the quotidian centre to travel to a transcendent ‘centre out there,’ thence a return home bearing spiritual (and perhaps also material) gifts acquired on the journey. The object of contemporary pilgrimage studies is typically some form of centring, or destinational pilgrimage, often though not always understood in some relationship - positive, negative, or nuanced - to Turnerian theory. Ultimate or, in Christian theological language, eschatological concern may (traditionally) or may not be part of destinational pilgrimage; when it is,

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21. Medieval pilgrims typically put their worldly and spiritual affairs in order before leaving on pilgrimage because death en route was a real possibility. For a detailed description of how pilgrims typically prepared for the journey, see Jonathan Sumption, *The Pilgrimage: An Image of Medieval Religion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 168-175.
Thus, Insular peregrinatio pro Christo was constituted not by travel to a holy centre, but rather by extended—sometimes permanent—movement away from the quotidian centre of an often-beloved earthly homeland. Whether travelling on foot to make hermitage in a neighbouring but still relatively ‘foreign’ locality, or setting out by river and sea to remote islands, or to the Continent (and, according to some albeit improbable claims, as far away as North America), to preach or teach, to sojourn or to wander onwards, the ultimate goal of the peregrini was the heavenly home. Christianity emerged in the context of a Jewish culture shot through with eschatological hope; the heart of Jesus’s preaching centres on the nearness of the Kingdom, or reign, of God (Βασιλεία τοῦ Θεοῦ, ultimate concern is eventually rewoven into the resumed, if transformed, pragmatics of returning to and living at home.

While peregrinatio and the English word ‘pilgrimage’ share a common etymology, the early Christian peregrinatio ex patria should not be mistaken for peregrinatio ad loca sancta, that is, destination or centring pilgrimage. In the Latin world, the term peregrinatio definitively indicated the living out of some form of foreignness, whether sentenced as punishment for criminal behaviour, or chosen as ascetical-penitential spiritual practice. Evoking both his erstwhile Neo-Platonism and his subsequent biblically-grounded grasp of the alienating effects of the Fall, Augustine of Hippo identified the Christian as inherently pilgrim, as ‘someone who feels foreign and wants to go home’ to the true fatherland. For Augustine, this was not a call to bodily journey but an affirmation of the human condition. Indeed, many early Christian writers, Augustine included, explicitly discouraged physical travel, both ad loca sancta as well as ex patria, for a variety of reasons ranging from concerns for personal safety, to the moral dangers en route, to the risk of idolatry of place associated with non-Christian traditions. In other instances, however, and especially in the Insular world of northwestern Europe, the psychic and physical asceticism of bodily departure became an expression of Christian earthly life as exile. Leaving home for these peregrini meant leaving not only kith and kin, but also leaving their social centre and their locus of familiarity and of political and bodily safety. In the ultimate act of faith in God’s providence, they assumed the legal status of foreigners, concretely performing through bodily displacement their spirituality of alienation and its implicit desire for their true home.

24. It can be argued that secularisation results not in a liquidation but rather an immanentisation of eschatology. For a short survey of secularised eschatology from Enlightenment onward, see Frederic J. Baumgartner’s ‘The Millennium of Pure Reason,’ (Chapter IX), in his Longing for The End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization (New York: Palgrave, 1999), 133-150.


27. Dietz, Wandering Monks, 36-42.

Throughout the gospels and the other New Testament writings, the nearness of the Kingdom seems alternately spatial and temporal, alternately at hand and yet still to come. This urgency - and ambiguity - is reflected in the eschatology of the scripture-soaked Insular Christians. Living latitudinally at the edge of the known world, they also saw themselves as living historically on the ‘edge of the eschaton,’ and so as heirs to the eschatology and missiology of Jesus and the apostles. *Peregrinatio pro Christo* afforded them variously and sometimes simultaneously the identity of strangers and foreigners on the earth (Heb 11:13), the opportunity for figurative if not bodily martyrdom via exile (Cambrai Homily), and the context for preaching and teaching ‘to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1.8).

Although not the originators of pilgrimage as voluntary exile, Insular Christians gained a reputation at home and abroad for holy restlessness. By the ninth century, Heiric, the irritable if witty Benedictine monk of Auxerre, famously wondered if indeed, given the numbers of Irish *peregrini* on the continent, there were any Irish left in Ireland. For a time, arguably from the fifth century if we count the Briton St. Patrick a *peregrinus* in Ireland (as I will below) into the ninth century if we likewise count the Irish and Anglo-Saxon scholars at the Carolingian court (which they themselves did), *peregrinatio* shaped Insular Christianity and influenced Christianity on the Continent. It did so internally as a characteristic expression of the Insular faith, and externally as *peregrini* exerted powerful spiritual and intellectual influence through their journeys beyond the Isles.

Practice of *peregrinatio* proved to be flexible, adapting to socio-political conditions in the Isles and abroad. From original ideals of asceticism and penance combined with local traditions of penal exile in secular law, *peregrinatio* was accommodated to the exigencies of both mission and scholarship. Seminal historian of early Irish Christianity, Kathleen Hughes, suggested that *peregrinatio* shifted from bodily journey practice to literary trope as both Insular and Continental attitudes toward monastic mobility waned and preference for stability increasingly gained official favour. The Viking raids in the Isles began in the late eighth century and spread to the Continent, doubtless adding a dampening effect on the travels of *peregrini*, though perhaps adding to the romance of the emerging journey tales. Even after the waning of the practice, the literary celebration of the eschatological wanderers preserved the spiritual ideals and adventures of the *peregrini*; the Voyage of Saint Brendan (*Nauigatio Sancti Brendani abbatis*, composed c.780-800), became a medieval blockbuster. Yet we know from the case of Dubhslaine and Macbeathadh and Maelinmhain that *peregrini* were still setting themselves adrift as late as 891.

### Textual sources of *peregrinatio*

1) *Patrick as peregrinus*

Patrick is not usually counted among the Insular *peregrini*. However, in both extant texts from his own hand, he characterises his life in Ireland as one of a stranger in an alien land, travelling for the sake of Christ. The *Epistola* is a withering warning to a warband that had captured and enslaved a number of Irishmen.

30. For example, in his ninth century *Life of St Gall*, Walafrid Strabo identified the practice of eútic pilgrimage with the very nature of being Irish: ‘Quibus consuetudo peregrinandi iam paene in naturam conversata est,’ quoted in Diana Webb, *Medieval European Pilgrimage*, c.700-c.1500 (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 7.
31. Sven Meeder references the *Miracula Sancti Germani Heiric of Auxerre*, (c.870) to this effect in ‘Irish Scholars and Carolingian Learning,’ *The Irish in Early Medieval Europe: Identity, Culture, and Religion* (eds. Roy Flechner and Sven Meeder; London: Palgrave, 2016), 185.
32. Linda Dohmen demonstrates how most of the Irish and Anglo-Saxons who lived at court or in monasteries on the Continent considered their stay abroad ‘as a *peregrinatio*, a pilgrimage in the service of God’; see her ‘Wanderers between Two World: Irish and Anglo-Saxon Scholars at the Court of Charlemagne’ in *Difference and Identity in Francia and Medieval France*, eds. Meredith Cohen and Justine Fihmhaber-Baker (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 96.
34. See Kathleen Hughes, ‘The Changing Theory and Practice of Irish Pilgrimage,’ *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 11/2 (October 1960): 148ff. From the eighth century onward, the spread of local movements like the Céli Dé from Ireland to Scotland and England, and the normalisation of Benedictine monasticism on the Continent meant increasing emphasis on stability of place in the religious life.
35. Hughes, ‘Irish Pilgrimage,’ 146-147.
37. Patrick, probably a Brythonic Celt, was born to a middle-class Christian family somewhere in western Britain, possibly Cumbria. Davies, *Celtic Spirituality*, 16.
38. *Confessio* 26, 34 in Davies, *Celtic Spirituality*, 74, 75; in this volume, Davies retitles the *Confessio* of Patrick as ‘Patrick’s Declaration of the Great Works of God.’ I retain *Confessio*. 
his Irish converts, and the Confessio, a defense against his critics by way of a declaration of his faith and his experience of the actions of God in his life. In the Confessio, Patrick explains how he himself was taken forcibly to Ireland as a slave, escaped, then years later returned voluntarily as a divinely contracted missionary. He fashions an eschatological portrait of himself as an itinerant evangelist, working at ‘the very ends of the earth’ (Confessio 1) and in ‘the last days . . . before the end of the world’ (Confessio 34), as per the great commission of the risen Christ (Matthew 28:18-20).

Patrick’s journeys do not fit the classic motif of peregrinatio according to which ascetic or penitential motive is primary and preaching or teaching secondary; indeed, Patrick’s record of his experiences exactly invert this order. But such a definition of peregrinatio is practically too restricted, saying more about ideal than reality, more about historiography than history. In his own words, he refers to his travels as peregrinationis meae, ‘my pilgrimage’ or ‘my exile’ (Confessio 37), to the Irish amongst whom he worked as alienigenas, ‘aliens’ (Confessio 1), and to himself as peregrino propter nomen suum: a ‘stranger for [the Lord’s] name’ or pilgrim (Confessio 26). In the Epistola Patrick calls himself proselitus et profuga, ob amorem Dei, ‘a stranger and exile for the love of God’ (Epistola 1), deliberately characterising himself as a sojourner in an alien land. Further, in both texts he underlines the hardships that are necessarily part of his mission, and clearly understands these in ascetical terms. He details his bodily suffering in ‘snow and ice and rain’ which compounded intentional spiritual practices of fasting and prayer (Confessio 16, 17). He describes how the ‘zeal of God’ and the ‘truth of Christ’ have driven his ultimate renunciation of his homeland for the love of ‘neighbours and children’ (Epistola 1). In his depiction of the trials inherent in his work, he places himself in the tradition of suffering in the spiritual wilderness, from the Jews in the book of Exodus through the temptation of Christ in the Gospels to the eremitic lives of Desert Fathers so beloved in the Insular world. In fact, he explicitly describes a twenty-eight day bodily passage through a (presumably actual) desert (desertum) after fleeing Ireland, complete with a battle with Satan (Confessio 19 ff).

There is evident in Patrick’s Confessio a significant and undoubtedly wrenching experience of the tension between home and not-home, between belonging and being an exile. He recounts how he was welcomed home by his parents after escaping slavery in Ireland, perhaps via Gaul and how, despite their pleas that he remain with them in Britain (Confessio 23), he chose to leave the hard-won familiarity and affection of home to return to Ireland after experiencing a ‘night vision’ in which ‘the voice of the Irish’ called to him. Patrick tells us in his own words that he was compelled in the very core of himself, ‘broken-hearted’ (Confessio 23), to leave home for a life as a missionary, but also as foreigner, an ascetic, and a penitent. According to Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘In Patrick’s case we can be certain of this much: he saw himself as a stranger in Ireland working on the fringes of human space and time.’ In his own writing and according to the grand tradition that arose in his name, it is clear that as existential anticipating the eschaton, Patrick must be counted among the Insular peregrini, indeed perhaps as the first of their number.

2) Columba the Princely peregrinus

Within a century of Patrick’s activity in Ireland, Saint Columba sailed from Ireland to the Isle of Iona in the Inner Hebrides. There he established a monastery that would become one of the most powerful and

39. Raiding parties back and forth across the Irish Sea were not uncommon in the years following the withdrawal of Rome from Britain in the early fifth century; Patrick’s first journey to Ireland was as a slave kidnapped by one such Irish foray into northwest Britain.

41. Davies, Celtic Spirituality, 75-76.

42. See James Bruce’s argument for the missionary component of peregrinatio in Adomnán’s Vita Columbae (late seventh century), in Prophecy, Miracles, Angels, and Heavenly Light? The Eschatology, Pneumatology, and Missiology of Adomnan’s Life of St Columba (Carlisle and Waynesboro: Paternoster Press, 2004), 209-211.

43. All references in this article to the Latin texts of Patrick’s Confessio and Epistola are from ‘Ego Patricius,’ Royal Irish Academy, accessed March 26, 2017. http://www.confessio.ie/.

44. Davies, Celtic Spirituality, 74, 482n; the reference to delivery for the sake of the Lord’s name is from Psalm 106:8.
45. Davies, Celtic Spirituality, 71.

47. Muirchú’s Life of Patrick, written in the seventh century, places Patrick in Gaul studying under Germanus at Auxerre ‘for a long time’ before returning to Britain; see the Vita Patricii 1:6, available in English translation in O’Loughlin’s Discovering Saint Patrick, 192-229.
48. Davies, Celtic Spirituality, 23.
49. O’Loughlin, Discovering Saint Patrick, 78.
50. Patrick’s dates are the subject of much debate; O’Loughlin’s argument for dating Patrick’s death in 493 remains convincing, Discovering Saint Patrick, 44-47.
influential of all Insular monastic foundations. On his father’s side, Columba was born into the powerful lineage of the Northern Uí Neill dynasty of Ulster; he became a monk as a young adult and had a productive religious career in Ireland where he founded several monasteries. His departure for Britain is recounted by Adomnán, ninth abbot of Iona in the Vita Columbae (VC hereafter), the most important source of information about Columba. Adomnán tells his readers how two years after the Battle of Cúl Dreimhne (561), ‘the holy man first set sail from Ireland to be a pilgrim’ [vir beatus de Scotia peregrinaturus primitus enavigavit].[51] Adomnán twice dates Columba’s departure by way of the battle,[52] but does not claim a causal link. By the eleventh century, however, there had arisen various associations to the effect that Columba’s journey was either imposed as punishment, or undertaken voluntarily as penance for his involvement in the battle,[53] the cause of which was (sometimes) reported to be the unauthorised copying by Columba of a manuscript that belonged to St Finnian.[54] Whether departing purely as peregrinus pro Christo, or for some legal or penitential reason connected or not to battles or manuscripts, Columba would not have been travelling into the unknown. As an Irish nobleman he would likely have known and even possibly had some pull within the Dál Riata kingdom that spanned the Irish northeast (part of Co. Antrim) and western Scotland (roughly Argyll). Columba’s social and religious capital is recognised on his arrival in Britain: Adomnán recounts how, soon after landing, he visited and delivered a clairvoyant message to King Conall mac Comgaill of Dál Riata (VC 1.7). It is King Conall who is reputed to have bestowed on Columba the Isle of Iona for his monastic settlement.[55] According to the Vita, Columba continued to be enmeshed in political issues in his homeland and made numerous journeys back to Ireland during his period of pilgrimage in Britain. He also received many visitors to Iona, seven of whom are identified by Adomnán’s story as peregrini. Nonetheless, he acquired the traditional nickname of Cúl ri Érenn, meaning ‘Back Toward Ireland,’ underlining his spiritual, if not always bodily or political separation from home.

Given the actual and likely socio-political components of Columba’s journey, it does not present with the same risky abandon as that of the Irishmen who landed in Cornwall in 891 (Introduction above). He is clearly identified by Adomnán as a peregrinus pro Christo,[57] recognising the condition of Columba’s earthly life at Iona as ‘living in pilgrimage [peregrinante] in Britain.’[58] Further, at his death: ‘he was crossing over from this weary pilgrimage [peregrinatione] to the heavenly home.’[59] Iona was Columba’s place of pilgrimage, not his second home: he was a peregrinus because he turned his back toward his earthly home in order to orient himself toward the eschaton.

3) Columbanus: peregrinus to the Continent

Perhaps the most celebrated of the Insular peregrini is St Columbanus, another Irishman who lived a generation after his namesake (and perhaps role model), St Columba. Columbanus’s story can be worked out by way of his own writing, which includes a rule for monks, a collection of homilies, and songs and poetry, in addition to a Vita written by one Jonas, a monk at Bobbio, only about twenty-five years after his subject’s death. Jonas’s sources included monks at Bobbio who had known Columbanus; he also used earlier texts,[60] and in the Vita seems keen to substantiate the data he provides.[61]

According to Jonas, the young Columbanus had an encounter with a female anchorite who was living in her ‘place of pilgrimage’ (peregrinationis locum), away, but still in Ireland.[62] Had she not been prevented by the ‘frailty of womanhood (fragilis sexus), she explains, she would have crossed the sea


52. Vita Columbae, second preface and 1.7.


55. Sharpe, Life of Columba, 16.

56. Sharpe, Life of Columba, 15.

57. Vita Columbae, Second Preface: ‘de Scotia ad Britanniam pro Christo peregrinari volens.’

58. Vita Columbae 1.13; Sharpe, Life of Columba, 122.

59. Vita Columbae 3.23; Sharpe, Life of Columba, 229.


(mare transacto) for a ‘superior’ pilgrimage place (potiorus peregrinationus locum).\textsuperscript{63} While the Irish recognised displacement both within and beyond Ireland as \textit{ailithre} (Irish cognate of the Latin \textit{peregrinatio}),\textsuperscript{64} clearly, the farther from home the religious exile the better it was. In the text, the holy woman chides Columbanus for staying in his native land (\textit{natalem solem incolens}),\textsuperscript{65} and encourages him to ‘depart, young man, from ruin’ (\textit{o inuenis, pergeo, evade ruinam}),\textsuperscript{66} in effect, to flee corruption by the body through journey in the body. Columbanus soon after leaves his family home - a touching emotional detail by Jonas has his mother protesting stretching herself, weeping, across the floor to block his way. But Columbanus did leave, never to see his home and family again, wherever ‘salvation via the open road’ would lead (\textit{quocumque salutis via a iter pandat}).\textsuperscript{67}

Leaving his native soil (\textit{relicto ergo natali solo}), Columbanus went to study Scripture with Abbot Sinell of Cluaninis (Co. Fermanagh), thence to the monastery at Bangor where he entered under the abbacy of Comgall, its founder. There Columbanus led an austere life of fasting and prayer, living and teaching the faith by example, by mortification - putting to figurative death - of the body.\textsuperscript{68} Into his middle age, this life apparently sufficed to fulfil Columbanus’s spiritual desires. However, eventually, perhaps remembering the holy \textit{peregrina} of his youthful encounter, Columbanus began to long for the \textit{potior peregrinatio}, that is, travel overseas and in perpetuity. Jonas links the desire to memory of the call of Abraham to leave his homeland and community, to become a ‘stranger and alien’\textsuperscript{69} while journeying toward a land of God’s choosing (Genesis 12.1).\textsuperscript{70} Abbot Comgall at first refuses permission to Columbanus, despite the latter’s declaration that it was his heart’s ardent desire (\textit{cordis ardorem et ignitum})\textsuperscript{71} to leave. Eventually though, Jonas tells us, Comgall gave in and Columbanus set off, with a group of companions, on the pilgrimage adventures on the continent for which he is famous, and which have gained him latter-day recognition as the patron of a united Europe.\textsuperscript{72}

The theme of estrangement as basic to human being emerges explicitly in Columbanus’s own writing. The clearest instances can be found in his eighth sermon, where he writes: ‘human life is like a road’ (\textit{viam exse humanam vitam}) and ‘we have no homeland on earth, since our Father is in heaven’ (\textit{patrimon ergo non habemus in terra, quia Pater noster in caelis est}).\textsuperscript{73} Further on in the same text, he describes the appropriate human state in this world as itinerant (\textit{semper viatoribus}), and desirous, ‘ever sighing for the true homeland,’\textsuperscript{74} therefore living as ‘pilgrims and guests of the world,’ oriented toward ultimate transcendence.\textsuperscript{75} For Columbanus, the Promised Land of Abraham has been spiritualised, perhaps via the Otherworld paradises of pre-Christian tales, into the Promised Land of the Saints,\textsuperscript{76} the former not a destination Abraham would reach in earthly life, and the latter likewise deferred for the Insular \textit{peregrini} in expectation of a second ‘fullness of time’ (Galatians 4:4).

4) \textbf{The Anglo-Saxon \textit{peregrini}}

Within the Anglo-Saxon world, identification as \textit{peregrinus} was reserved for those whose journeys took them across the sea.\textsuperscript{77} and like the Irish before them, they took to the sea in considerable numbers, in order to ‘undergo a life without a feeling of belonging anywhere and to anyone, except to God.’\textsuperscript{78} In his

\begin{itemize}
\item 72. Robert Schuman, one of the founders of the European Union, referred to Columbanus as ‘The patron saint of those who seek to construct a united Europe.’ Quoted in Brendan Lehane, \textit{Early Celtic Christianity} (London: Constable, 1994), 147.
\item 74. \textit{Instructio VIII.2: quasi peregrini semper patriam suspiremus, semper patriam desideremus}.
\item 75. \textit{Instructio VIII.2: vivamus in via ut viatores, ut peregrini, ut hospites mundi}.
\item 76. Consider, for example, Otherworlds as depicted in the Irish \textit{imramma} and \textit{echtrae}, genres of voyage and adventure tales first written down by the end of the seventh century, but with roots in indigenous myths that are certainly older in origin. That sea voyages and Otherworlds should be part of Insular cultures is hardly surprising; that Christians of the Isles should continue this partition, likewise.
\item 77. Charles-Edwards, ‘The Social Background to Irish \textit{Peregrinatio},’ 45.
\item 78. Linda Dohmen, ‘Wanderers between Two Worlds: Irish and Anglo-Saxon Scholars at the Court of Charlemagne,’ \textit{Difference and Identity in Francia and Medieval France} (Meredith Cohen and Justine Firnhaber-Baker, eds.; Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 92.
\end{itemize}
Hedda extols Egbert’s galvanizing effect on Anglo-Saxon missionary journeys to the Continent (including those of Willibrord, Wigbert, and Swidbert in Frisia, plus the two Ewalds who were martyred for their labours in Saxony). But Bede also specifically and repeatedly calls readers’ attention to Egbert’s choice to separate himself from his homeland: he spent much of his adult life in Ireland, thus honouring a vow made on recovery from a severe illness as a young man. Bede tells us that indeed, Egbert lived as ‘peregrinus for the Lord until the end of his life’ (Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum, 4.3); ‘living as a stranger in Ireland for the sake of a heavenly homeland hereafter, this venerable servant of Christ was worthy to be named with all honour.’


80. Bede 4.9: venerabilis et cum omni honorificentia nominandus famulus Christi et sacerdos Ecgberct, quem in Hibernia insula peregrinam ducere uitam pro adipiscenda in caelis patria retulimus,
By the late eighth century, Insular scholars were arriving in increasing numbers at the court of Charlemagne, where they were valued (and generously supported) for their intellectual sophistication and concrete contributions as teachers. The reputation for intense religiosity and missionary zeal of earlier waves of Irish and Anglo-Saxon peregrini preceded them, making the Insular cleric-scholar a fixture of the so-called Carolingian Renaissance. In his ninth century biography of Charlemagne, Einhard (d. 840) notes how the king ‘liked foreigners’ (amabat peregrinos), and looked after them well (in eis suscipientibus magnum habebat curam). Einhard himself however, expressed some ambivalence, toward the ‘foreigners,’ suggesting that they were a burden on the court’s resources (ingenta incommode).[81] An anonymous hagiographer of Alcuin of York, one of the most illustrious of the Insular scholars to ply their trade in Francia, includes a telling story from the monastery of Saint Martin at Tours where Alcuin had been made abbot by Charlemagne in 796. It recounts how one Aigulf, another Anglo-Saxon, overheard the local monks grumbling among themselves, to wit: ‘Oh God, free this monastery from these Britons!’[82]

The identity of the Insular peregrini-scholars was a complicated one. Clearly, for them, there has been a shift in the expression of peregrinatio away from the open-ended journey without oars literal or figurative, but the desire remains to live out - via bodily dislocation and dispossession from the earthly homeland - the conviction that the true home is outside of earthly time and space. On the one hand, they were made welcome and were generally well supported body and soul, by their patrons; on the other hand they were treated to the scorn (and perhaps jealousy) of others. In a practical sense, they had new homes - some stayed for many years, some permanently - but they did not consider them ‘home,’ nor did they refer to them as such.[83] The earthly patria was in the Isles, and was still an object of longing: in a sense that longing was essential to peregrinatio. As the material of sacramental bread and wine both represents and presents (makes present) spiritual hunger, living in peregrinatione away from the earthly homeland both represented and presented the desire for the true homeland. Alcuin, for one, explicitly identified himself repeatedly in his writing as peregrinus. His self-authored epitaph carries through the recognition of the paradoxical condition of human being as homo viator. In the form of a poignant memento mori, he invites the future visitor to his grave to ‘pause, traveller’ (subsiste, viator),[84] to think about life and death, while even in death Alcuin waits for the sound of the angelic trumpet to call him forth for a final journey at the end of time.[85]

5) The Seafarer as peregrinus

A particularly evocative expression of peregrinatio as basic to the human condition can be found in the Anglo-Saxon poem the The Seafarer. Likely originating in the mid-ninth century in the West Midland region of Britain,[86] the poem consists of 124 lines, often divided by scholars into two or three sections. It is generally classified as an elegy, but it also shows apparent homiletic intention. An ongoing debate continues as to whether the poem ought to be read literally - that is, as being about the journey of an actual peregrinus pro Christo - or allegorically, as a theological-metaphorical exposition of the Christian anthropology of alienation from the aeterna patria. In fact, the poem works on both levels such that the literal meaning carries - or better, embodies - the figurative meaning, and thus gives it concrete expression, much as the practice of peregrinatio embodies - actually and symbolically - the desire for ‘white martyrdom.’ The Seafarer moves through intense descriptions of life on the water ‘in the paths of exile’ (wreccan lastum, line 15b), including the physical hardships of passage through the seasons at sea: ‘My feet were afflicted by cold, fettered in frost’ (Calde geþrungen / wæron mine meahte, lines 25b-26b) and of the wild zeal for journey

82. Quoted in Dohmen, Wanderers, 90.
83. Dohmen, Wanderers, 94.
The groves burst forth and blossom, towns become fair,
meadows grow green, the world revives;
all these things urge the heart of the eager man
to set out on a journey, he who means to travel
far over the ocean paths
... the paths of exile to the end of the world.

The poem ranges back and forth between weariness
and enthusiasm; it links journey tale with homily,
and turns its readers toward the eschaton. The frailty
and enthusiasm; it links journey tale with homily,
size in the old pagan world even as Christians opt for a new one:
Beowulf of the melancholy Tolkien famously noted in
elegiac solemnity pervades all things, and thus achieving purity of wisdom.

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are invoked in reference to fate and worldly glory, and
gold-giving nobility. But the splendour is undoubtedly
fading, and the seafarer knows where his eternal
destiny lies: not among kin, nor in the blossoming
groves of fair towns of his native land, nor even in a
gold-strewn grave (græf ... golde stregan, line 97).
Rather his ‘heart’s longings always urge [him] / to
 undertake a journey, to the country / of a foreign
people far across the sea,”

Departing for a foreign
country (elþeodigra eard) suggests the potior
peregrinatio commended to young Columbanus by the
holy woman in Jonas’s Vita. Ida Gordon reminds us of
the possible double meaning of the phrase that brings
together the literal and allegorical levels of The
Seafarer whereby ‘elþeodigra eard’ may also be an
allusion to the alien condition of human beings who
are ultimately only guests in this world. Miranda
Wilcox makes the case for the double meaning by
reference to an Anglo-Saxon homily from the
Blickling collection,
written before the tenth century:

it is needful for us to perceive the blindness of
our pilgrimage; we are in the foreign land of
this world - we are exiles in this world . . . and
now we must seek hereafter another kingdom

In the same spirit, the poem’s seafarer figuratively
and perhaps literally takes to the sea, longing and suffering
for what is beyond the worldly horizon, on the way to
his ‘place of resurrection.’

Conclusion: Peregrinatio pro Christo as
Existential Migration

The Insular peregrini belong to another time and place,
and their practices of intentional self-alienation and
perpetual pilgrimage might seem very strange, if not
pathological, to us today. We know that even in the
ancient world, peregrinatio (or xeniteia) went in and
out of spiritual fashion, mostly prompting dissuasion if
not condemnation, as centeredness and stability were
normalized early in the history of Christian practice. Even while the ascetical ideal of detachment and the
anthropology of alienation took hold, these

88. ‘When that aprill with his shoures soote / The droghte of
march hath perced to the roote … Thanne longen folk to
goon on pilgrimage / And palmeres for to seken
strange strondes’ in Geoffrey Chaucer, The Complete
Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer (John H Fisher
89. Crossley-Holland, The Anglo-Saxon World, 54. In
Gordon, The Seafarer, 39-40, 41: ‘Bearwas bstostum
nima, byrig fægriað, / wongas whitigað, woruld
onneted: / ealle þa gemoniað modes fuses / sefan to sife
þam þe swa þenceð / on flodwegas feor gewitan ... þa
wræclastas ... ’ (Lines 48a-52b, 57a).
90. Some scholars have posited two different speakers,
others two different writers, suggesting alternatively a
dialogue, two speeches, and/or two texts joined together.
For a view of the poem as a literary unity, see Gordon,
The Seafarer, 2.
mode, ond þæt on staþelum healdan, / ond gewis wærum,
iswum clæne’ (lines 109-110).
94. J. R. R. Tolkien, ‘Beowulf: The Monsters and the
Critics,’ Beowulf: A Verse Translation (Seamus Heaney,
trans.; Daniel Donoghue, ed.; New York and London:
Norton, 2002), 105, 120.
95. Crossley-Holland, The Anglo-Saxon World, 55. See
Gordon, The Seafarer, 38: ‘monað modes lust mæla
gehwylce / ðer to feran, þæt ic feor heonan /
elþeodigra eard gesece.’ (lines 36-38).
96. The collection was written before the tenth century and
is preserved in the Scheide Library MS 71, Princeton.
97. From the homily for Quinquesimesa Sunday, translated
by Richard Morris, and quoted in Miranda Wilcox,
‘Exilic Imagining in The Seafarer and The Lord of the
Rings,’ Tolkien the Medievalist (London: Routledge,
2003), 145.
anthropologists Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson credited Schwartz’s notion in the title of their edited volume on identity-formation at the close of the twentieth century; their own chapter in that volume challenges ‘the implication usually drawn’ about the necessary ‘relationship between identity and fixity’ and the default connecting of self-knowing and ‘being at home,’ that is, ‘being, if not stationary, then at least centred,’ especially in globalized postmodernity.[102]

These theories proposing mobility as normative are acutely resonant with aspects of ancient texts by and about both the premodern Celtic peregrini and postmodern, post-Christian, post-secular pilgrims. Madison observes that there is (for some people at least) a powerful, even irresistible, need to leave where they are, not for some concrete goal (although travel largely realised and performed virtually, as peregrinatio in stabilitate, that is, interior spiritual journey lived out within monastery walls.[98] And arguably still in our secular contemporary culture, the ideal of stability, of settling down, is indicative of personal maturity and secure self-identity, what psychologist Greg Madison calls our ‘conventional settled-centric bias.’[99] In his theorising of the contemporary condition and performance of ‘existential migration,’ Madison pushes back against the common professional interpretation of the restlessness of voluntary mobility as psychological pathology, and he is not alone.[100] As early as the mid-seventies, psychological anthropologist Theodore Schwartz had been challenging the conventional linking of identity-formation with stability of socio-cultural place in his notion of American youth as ‘migrants of identity’ on continual quest for authenticity. [101] Schwartz insisted that identity might be shaped temporally as well as spatially. Social

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103. The flood of first-person accounts of contemporary walking pilgrimage, especially but not exclusively along the Camino de Santiago de Compostella, now constitutes a distinct literary niche. For a now-classic study of Camino pilgrims see Nancy Louise Frey, *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). For different permutations of postmodern pilgrimage practices, see the second part of this special journal issue.
for work and education, or even journey to a sacred centre, may provide the justification for the mobility). The existential migrant moves not so much to a new centre, as away from the comfort and familiarity of centeredness, trusting in the possibility of meaning in and through openness to the unknown, the yet-to-come. For the existential migrant, the body becomes the dynamic centre, the itinerant temporal home. Madison, Schwartz, Rapport, and Dawson have identified something not only socio-psychologically relevant but, to use Madison’s term, existentially crucial in the dynamic and ambiguous condition of being human, something the Insular peregrini intuited religiously, theologised, and radically performed in the early Middle Ages at the western edge of Europe. This far, Madison has not dealt specifically with the sharp rise in interest in walking pilgrimage in the last generation or two, but his work poses new questions for pilgrimage studies as to what compels contemporary ‘serial pilgrims’, many of whom otherwise live comfortable lives, to embrace voluntary and at time extreme (if temporary) discomfort and dispossession. Perhaps the disruptive experience of sheer otherness encountered in the inherent asceticism of leaving home, and of sustained mobility, offers release from the hyper-stimulation and stultifying ease of a secularised cultural landscape that has been flattened by disenchchantment, and drained of contexts for transcendent experience. Considering existentially the practices of the peregrini of the early medieval Insular world might provide an interpretive key to thinking about postmodern mobility that is engaged voluntarily, indeed apparently with some strong sense of inevitability. The existential migrant, the contemporary serial pilgrim, and the early medieval peregrinus seem to share a fundamental capacity for at least desiring a temporally-deferred ‘something-more’ that is hard to contextualise in our contemporary post-Christian context. They each enact in their own way a pull towards attentive ‘living with awareness of human insecurity’ and the paradoxical, even excruciating, longing for something beyond that. Perhaps the eschatological dreams of Dubhslaine and Macbeathadh and Maelinmhain and their spiritual compatriots bring something important, if unexpected and certainly challenging, to the conversation.

104. See Janice Poltrick-Donato’s article in this issue for statistics on walking pilgrimage and other practices of mobility in which distinction between spirituality and recreation blur.


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