
Voyagers in the Vault of Heaven: The Phenomenon of Ships in the Sky in Medieval Ireland and Beyond

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Résumé

L'article se penche sur le phénomène des navires se déplaçant dans le ciel. Ces visions surréelles sont d'abord et avant tout examinées dans le contexte de l'Irlande médiévale, mais l'auteur présente aussi des observations aussi distantes dans le temps et l'espace que l'Angleterre du XIII^e siècle et le Canada du XVIII^e siècle. La plus ancienne représentation d'un currach (bateau de peau) irlandais voguant dans le ciel orne une colonne en pierre du VIII^e siècle. En reliant cette preuve iconographique à l'apparition de navires dans le ciel d'un monastère celte, on dispose d'un cadre permettant d'étudier la légende de ces embarcations. La compréhension du concept des « navires célestes » nécessite que l'on comprenne le gouffre culturel qui existe entre la pensée médiévale et la pensée moderne. L'article examine et confirme la signification du navire en tant que métaphore culturelle et symbole religieux persistant.

Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of ships voyaging in the sky. Such fantastical sightings are considered primarily in an early medieval Irish context, but evidence from places as widely separated in time and place as thirteenth-century England and eighteenth-century Canada is also addressed. The earliest material representation of an Irish currach (skin boat) being rowed heavenwards is on an eighth-century carved stone pillar. By connecting this iconographic evidence to the appearance of ships in the sky above a Celtic monastery, a framework is established from which to investigate the "airship" mirabilia. Understanding the cultural gulf that exists between medieval and modern thinking is central to the concept of "ships in the air." The paper addresses the significance of the ship as an enduring cultural metaphor and religious symbol and affirms these meanings.

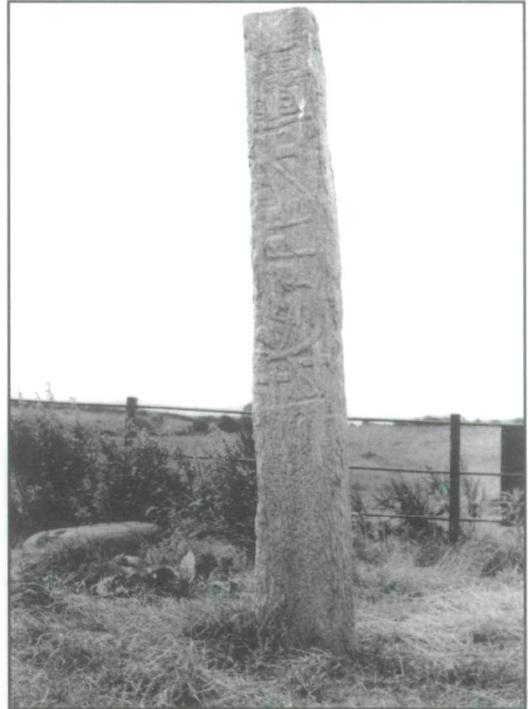
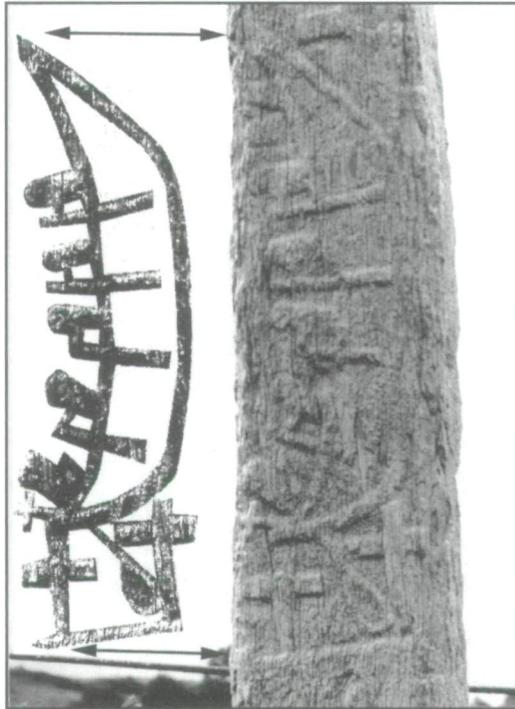
The glories of early Christian Irish art are manifest in preserved illuminated manuscripts, intricate metalwork and the monumental carved stone crosses, pillars and slabs that still survive today in the countryside, churchyards and monastic ruins of Ireland. While the richly carved high crosses of the ninth and tenth centuries, with their emphasis on figuration, are the fullest expression of representational art, earlier carved and incised stoneworks are no less significant in terms of their iconography, decoration and symbolism.¹

The eighth-century Kilnaruan pillar stone (Fig. 1), overlooking Bantry Bay in County Cork, is of particular interest to maritime archeologists, historians and ethnologists, because its Christian-theme carvings include a unique pre-Viking depiction of the Irish skin-covered boat known as a "currach."² Prior to the arrival of the

Vikings in the ninth and tenth centuries with their advanced wooden boatbuilding technology, the skin-covered currach was the common seagoing craft of Ireland. It was of key importance to the sea-connected Celtic Church and figured prominently in the "immrama" or mystical voyage tales of early Christian Ireland, together with the story of St Brendan's voyage to the Promised Land, which achieved great popularity in medieval Europe. Today the currach, in its canvas-covered derivative form, is still in use on the Atlantic seaboard of western Ireland, where material remnants of the European past often have found their last resting place (Fig. 2).³

Carved in relief, the Bantry currach points skywards in an upright panel measuring 88.0 x 18.0 cm on the south-eastern face of the 2.31 m high sandstone pillar.⁴ Clearly mod-

Fig. 1
 “Ship of the Church”
 carving on the south-east
 face of Kilnaruane pillar
 stone, Bantry, County
 Cork, Ireland (Courtesy
 The Ulster Folk and
 Transport Museum)



elled on reality, it is depicted in lively profile with four men pulling hard on their oars, while a fifth figure sits in the stern with a steering oar. A small cross is mounted at the stern behind the helmsman. Three larger crosses are carved in the panel outside the boat, one beside the bow and two beside the stern. Significantly the orientation of these three external crosses is conventionally upright and at right angles to the cross in the currach and indeed to the currach as a whole. They combine to affirm the overall meaning of the panel, that representationally the currach is being rowed heavenwards by its crew and that symbolically, as the Ship of the Church, it is voyaging through the heavens to salvation.

Françoise Henry, almost sixty years ago, was the first to recognize the remarkable boat depiction on the Bantry or Kilnaruane stone pillar, which she ascribed to the eighth century. Following a brief description of the boat, she observed that “the unexpected thing about it is that it shoots straight upwards amidst a sea of crosses... The little cross over the rudder can leave little doubt that we have a representation of the boat of the Church... here it seems to be very literally portrayed as sailing to Heaven.”⁵ In 1964 the boat was specifically identified as a currach by Paul Johnstone.⁶ More recently, Colum and James Hourihane, in a detailed analysis of the complete iconography of the pillar, again recognized the boat carving

as “a representation of the Ship of the Church.”⁷ However, their developed interpretation that “the symbol of the church as the ship is seen, surrounded by crosses, *travelling through a storm*,” is disputed here. Primarily this is because the orientation of the three external crosses has been overlooked as evidence that clearly implies the heavenly location of the vessel. However, the material evidence alone is insufficient to comprehend the full significance of this enigmatic image. Different kinds of evidence, as in all investigations of the past, need to be adduced in order to locate the material depiction of the celestial currach in a wider historical-cultural context and so better understand its contemporary resonances.

That the “skyborne” iconography of the carved Bantry currach was well within the frames of cultural comprehension of eighth-century Irish people is demonstrated, and indeed reinforced by an eighth-century textual reference in the Irish annals to the actual appearance of ships in the sky as an observed event. Under the year A.D. 749, the *Annals of Ulster* laconically record that “Ships (naues) with their crews were seen in the air above Clonmacnoise.”⁸ The evidence of this report of vessels sailing in the heavens above the important Celtic monastery of Clonmacnoise, makes for an imaginative and significant linkage with the contemporary iconography of a heaven-bound currach, and both provide



Fig. 2
Aran Islanders in their
canvas-covered currachs,
west of Ireland, circa
1900 (Courtesy The
Ulster Folk and
Transport Museum)

compelling reasons for exploring further the remarkable phenomenon of ships voyaging in the air, as witnessed at Clonmacnoise and beyond.

The monastery of Clonmacnoise was founded by St Ciarán in the mid sixth century and subsequently became one of the most important monastic sites in Ireland.⁹ Between circa A.D. 700 and 1200, it was a major ecclesiastical centre of religious life, culture, learning, craftsmanship and trade. The growth of Clonmacnoise's power and prestige was in large measure due to its geographical location in the centre of Ireland and to its physical position on a ridge rising above the River Shannon and surrounding boggy lowlands. Significantly the monastery was at the communications heart of the island, situated at the major junction of north-south river traffic and the main east-west land route. Because of its wealth and ease of access, Clonmacnoise repeatedly suffered the depredations of both Viking and native Irish raiders. Their burnings and plunderings, together with other notable events at Clonmacnoise, are recorded in the Irish annals, those remarkable year-by-year chronicles of early and medieval Irish history. In 1179, for example, the *Annals of the Four Masters* record that "one hundred and five houses were burned at Clonmacnoise during a predatory excursion."¹⁰

Clonmacnoise declined dramatically from the thirteenth century onwards and was in ruins by the late seventeenth century. Nevertheless, Clonmacnoise still remains a sacred site and place of pilgrimage. Today the tranquil ruins of the monastery, with its nine churches, round tower and stone crosses, encourage an imaginative engagement with the past. For the empathetic visitor this is a place redolent with otherness, a place for reflection on mortality and external verities. In the flat lands that it commands, Clonmacnoise is also a place of enormous skies where the natural gaze is heavenwards. Staring upwards on an autumn day from within the stone walls of the decayed monastery, vapour trails of transatlantic jets can be seen fusing the clouds and in a leap of fancy it is possible to envisage a celestial vessel sailing in the heights above. In such a moment past and present, time and place are in alignment with imagination and intellectual curiosity. Through the azure of this Clonmacnoise skyscape, twentieth-century sensibilities begin to mesh with the numinous thought of eighth-century ships voyaging in the vault of heaven.

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In charting the Irish phenomenon of "ships in the air," the first task is to assemble core accounts and descriptions from documentary sources. References in the *Annals of Ulster*

(quoted above) and the *Annals of Ireland*, otherwise known as the *Annals of the Four Masters*, are characteristically brief. The latter records that in "The Age of Christ 743 ships with their crews were plainly seen in the sky this year."¹¹ Allowing for historical disparity this entry may well be referring to the same event that the *Annals of Ulster* record as having occurred over Clonmacnoise in 749. Early Christian and medieval Ireland was particularly rich in miraculous happenings and the appearance of airships was only one example of a large number of wonderful events recorded in the annals and other primary sources. Many of these "wonders" of Ireland, or "mirabilia," were sky-related and included a steeple of fire in the air, a cross raised up in the air, together with showers of silver, honey and blood.¹² In the nineteenth century and early years of the present century, Kuno Meyer and other Celtic scholars researched the primary sources of the Irish "mirabilia" and published annotated translations of these accounts of wonders, including the sighting of ships in the air.¹³ It is clear from this material that airships made appearances at two key locations, namely the monastery of Clonmacnoise and the important gathering fair of Tailltinn, now Teltown, in County Meath. Here follow the stories as published by Meyer.¹⁴

Ship in the air at Teltown — translated from Irish mirabilia in the late fourteenth-century *Book of Ballymote* and originally based on ninth-century Latin text by Nennius.

Congalach, son of Maelmthig (+A.D. 956) was at the fair of Teltown on a certain day, when he saw a ship (sailing) along in the air. One of the crew cast a dart at a salmon. The dart fell down in the presence of the gathering, and a man came out of the ship after it. When he seized its end from above, a man from below seized it from below. Upon which the man from above said: "I am being drowned," said he. "Let him go," said Congalach; and he is allowed to go up, and then he goes from them swimming.

Meyer further identifies a reference in the manuscript *Book of Leinster* in which the appearance of three ships in the air is mentioned as one of the wonders of Teltown, when King Domnall mac Murchada (A.D. 763) was at the fair. Additionally he gives an incomplete versified Latin account of the Teltown event from an unidentified Paris manuscript. Literally translated it is as follows:¹⁵

A/The king of the Irish was in an/the open-air exercise ground [for martial games] at a cer-

tain time with diverse crowds, with soldiers admirable in their arrangement. Lo! suddenly they see a ship racing through the air from which, at that moment, a man had thrown a spear after a fish which [spear] rushed to the earth, but the man swimming [after it] drew it back. Who is going to hear these things...

Ship in the air at Clonmacnoise — translated from the Norse book *Kongs Skuggsjo* or *Speculum Regale* (Royal Mirror), written circa A.D. 1250. Significantly Meyer concludes that the accounts of Irish mirabilia in the *Speculum Regale* were not derived from any written sources, but were entirely based on oral information obtained in Ireland itself.¹⁶

There is yet another thing that will seem most wonderful, which happened in the city that is called Cloena (Clonmacnoise). In that city is a church which is sacred to the memory of the holy man Kiranus. And there it thus befell on a Sunday, when people were at church and were hearing Mass, there came dropping from the air above an anchor, as if it were cast from a ship, for there was a rope attached to it. And the fluke of the anchor got hooked in an arch at the church door, and all the people went out of the church and wondered, and looked upwards after the rope. They saw a ship float on the rope and men in it. And next they saw a man leap overboard from the ship, and dive down towards the anchor, wanting to loosen it. His exertion seemed to them, by the movement of his hands and feet, like that of a man swimming in the sea. And when he came down to the anchor, he endeavoured to loosen it. And then some men ran towards him and wanted to seize him. But in the church, to which the anchor was fastened, there is a bishop's chair. The bishop was by chance on the spot, and he forbade the men to hold that man, for he said that he would die as if he were held in water. And as soon as he was free he hastened his way up again to the ship; and as soon as he came up, they cut the rope, and then sailed on their way out of the sight of men. And the anchor has ever since lain as a witness of the event in that church.

Another account, shorter and differing in detail, but perhaps expressed more dramatically, is published by Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson in *A Celtic Miscellany*.¹⁷ The original Irish text is translated by Jackson from a fourteenth to fifteenth-century manuscript source, author unknown.¹⁸

One day the monks of Clonmacnoise were holding a meeting on the floor of the church, and as they were at their deliberations there they saw a ship sailing over them in the air,

going as it were on the sea. When the crew of the ship saw the meeting and the inhabited place below them, they dropped anchor, and the anchor came right down on the floor of the church, and the priests seized it. A man came down out of the ship after the anchor, and he was swimming as if he were in the water, till he reached the anchor; and they were dragging him down then. "For God's sake let me go!" Said he, "for you are drowning me." Then he left them, swimming in the air as before, taking his anchor with him.

Despite their variations, these chronicles have common characteristics and share a number of features that are readily identifiable:

- Extraordinary happenings are regarded as actual historical events and are transmitted during the Middle Ages as fact, not fiction, despite their supernatural dimension.
- The events are witnessed by numerous people, both secular (Teltown) and religious (Clonmacnoise).
- Seen from the ground, vessels are floating in the air above.
- Seen from the vessels, the air between them and the ground below is perceived as water in which fish swim and which enables the vessels to float above a submarine world.
- This air/water is life-giving oxygen to the people on the ground, but is life-threatening water to the swimming aircrew who almost drown.
- Air/water is the common element, which envelopes both ground people and sky people, as the heights above and the depths below.

Essentially the central theme of the "air-ship" mirabilia is that, not only is an inversion of the natural order of things possible, but that the natural order of things can be perceived from complementary perspectives and that simultaneously the marvellous is both in the world and out of the world.

A modern Irish reworking of this medieval wonder theme can be located in the luminous poetry of Seamus Heaney, who draws on the experience of living in Ireland, past and present, and imagines it into the universal. More than twenty years before he was awarded the Nobel Literature Prize in 1995, Heaney wrote: "I have always listened for poems, they come sometimes like bodies out of a bog, almost complete, seeming to have been laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery...my quest for definition, while it may lead backward, is conducted in the living speech of the land-

scape I was born into."¹⁹ The dualism of much of Heaney's poetry, the imaginative tensions between what is and what might be, is manifest in a wonderfully fluid poem that navigates the marvellous encounter between the monks of Clonmacnoise and the airship that appeared above them while at their prayers.²⁰

After telling how the ship's anchor hooked itself by accident into the altar rails of the oratory and "the big hull rocked to a standstill," a crewman came down from the ship to free the anchor, but it was no good. The abbot said "this man can't bear our life here and will drown," so the monks helped to release him and the ship. As the fantastic ship resumes its aerial voyage, our world view is transfigured by the poet, for "the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back/Out of the marvellous as he had known it."

The twentieth-century mindset, cultured in post-Enlightenment quasi-rationalist and scientific thinking, often has difficulty in comprehending the cultural frames of older, simpler societies, where the distinctions between reality and the marvellous are blurred and where transitions between them are normal and natural. In a recent investigative journey through the European Middle Ages, Christopher Frayling has delineated the great gulf between modern and medieval thinking. "Today," he writes, "there is an assumption that beneath the surface things are fundamentally incoherent (part of a chaosmos), whereas then there was an assumption that beneath the surface things were fundamentally coherent (part of a cosmos) — a reflection of the will of God."²¹ In this earlier world, a symbolic framework of order and structure was predicated on belief and faith in the transcendent God. The medieval view of the universe was essentially Platonic and Biblical in origin. In it the heavens, the earth and all creation were ranged in an unalterable, hierarchical and interlocking system of order, from the angels down to man — for whom the world existed — and thence to the flora and fauna and all living things.²²

This view of the cosmos survived in modified forms into the post-medieval world and beyond. Indeed remnants of it still can be located in twentieth-century religious devotion and expression. For example, the present Hymnal of the Church of Ireland includes a three-verse hymn by the English poet and essayist Joseph Addison (1672–1719), which, in a simplified way, essentially reflects the medieval concept of a divinely created cosmic order.²³

V.1 The spacious firmament on high,
With all the blue ethereal sky,

And spangled heavens, a shining frame,
Their Great Original proclaim.
The unwearied sun, from day to day,
Does his Creators power display,
And publishes to every land
The work of an almighty hand.

Within the highly structured theological framework of the Middle Ages, various events and happenings, including the miraculous, could be explained by reference to "providence" or the direct intervention of God in the affairs of everyday human life. All history could be regarded as the inevitable unfolding of God's providential plan for humanity.²⁴ Historical writing and literature of the time reflected the prevailing teleological Christian belief in heaven and hell, repentance, redemption, resurrection and eternal life made possible by God through the incarnation and sacrifice of Christ, who intervened in history for the salvation of humanity. The miraculous and marvellous were integral elements in this medieval world picture, for through such wonderful and inexplicable occurrences, the presence of divine ordering on earth was revealed and made manifest.

While, over time, the Irish shared this medieval conception with the rest of Europe, Ireland's distance and separation from continental Christianity had earlier resulted in the development of a distinctively Celtic form of Christianity, the glory of which was expressed in robust spirituality and in a flowering of literary and visual arts of remarkable brilliance. It was also because of Ireland's geographical remoteness that early Christian religious traditions and practices survived in the decentralised monastically structured Irish church, long after they had died out elsewhere. Indeed it was not until the twelfth century, with the coming of the Normans and their continental customs, that the Irish church was assimilated to the Roman, and even then the process was not complete. Hence, early and medieval Irish oral and written literature, which was constantly being retold and recopied in manuscript versions, is full of all sorts of fascinating religious stories, real and imagined, which in continental Europe were known only in very early Apocryphal sources or in the oldest practices of the primitive Church.²⁵ Compared with other contemporary European literature, the most outstanding characteristic of early medieval Celtic Irish literature is its imaginative power and inventiveness. It speaks to us over the centuries in narratives of poetic vividness and freshness and reflects a

world in which the ordinary is suffused with the extraordinary, the real with the fantastic. Here, as the following story illustrates, the natural and the supernatural coexist without incongruity, for in Ireland, as elsewhere in medieval Europe, their spheres overlapped and the distinction between them had not yet been fully drawn.²⁶

How St Scoithín Got His Name

Once upon a time he met Barra of Cork, he walking on the sea and Barra in a ship. "How is it that you are walking on the sea?" said Barra. "It is not the sea at all, but a flowery blossomy field," said Scoithín, and he took up in his hand a crimson flower and threw it from him to Barra in the ship. And Scoithín said, "How is it that a ship is floating on the field?" At those words, Barra stretched his hand down into the sea and took a salmon out of it, and threw it to Scoithín. And it is from that flower [scoth] that he is called Scoithín.

Translation from a tenth to eleventh-century Irish text, author unknown.²⁷

This perplexing but strangely believable maritime encounter between two Irish saints is, like the mysterious appearance of ships in the air, a reversal of normal experience and expectancy. Further examples of miraculous inverted reality are found in the early Irish "immrama" or voyage tales, and in particular in *Immram Brain* or the Voyage of Bran. Composed in Irish, perhaps as early as the latter part of the seventh century, it has been persuasively argued that *Immram Brain*, despite its apparently pagan text, is in fact a thoroughly Christian allegory of Man setting out on the voyage to Paradise.²⁸ After two days at sea in their currach, Bran and his companions encounter the sea god Manannán Mac Lir coming over the ocean in his chariot. What seems to Bran to be the swell of the sea is to Manannán a flowery plain where his chariot can drive; and what to Bran are leaping salmon are to Manannán gambolling calves and lambs. Manannán sings to Bran:

*The colour of the ocean on which you are,
the bright colour of the sea over which you row:
it has spread out yellow and green;
it is solid land.*²⁹

Implicitly Bran's currach has become a ship in the air, for Manannán goes on to reveal that Bran and his crew are really sailing over a beautiful wooded plain, a fruitful paradise where the ageless people of Manannán's land live without sin or transgression.

*It is along the top of a wood
that your little coracle (currach) has sailed
over ridges,
there is a beautiful wood of fruit
under the prow of your little ship.*³⁰

In his translation notes for this quatrain, Séamus MacMathúna points out that this metaphorical description of a ship sailing over a wood is found elsewhere in Irish literature and as a wonder motif has been given the name "l'aeronef." As an example, he quotes the "echtra," or adventure tale, in which Orlando enters the Forest of Wonders. He hadn't gone far "when he saw a well-laden and very large ship with four different sails...and she sailing over the top of the trees and the wood more rapidly than any ship at sea." MacMathúna recognizes that the motif is not confined to Irish literature and suggests that it is of considerable antiquity. He identifies it in the work of the second century Roman writer Lucian, who, in his *True History* describes how a ship sailed over a sea forest by means of the wind filling the sails and pushing the vessel across the branches of the trees, just like sailing through water, but of course rather slower.³¹

Essentially all of these wonders and stories of wonders are a challenge to absolutism of knowledge. They imply the relativity of all human knowledge, that is, the distinction between the unknown and unknowable (noumena) and things perceived or apprehended by our senses (phenomena). These wonder stories represent, in a particular way, one of the defining characteristics of Celtic literature that Nora Chadwick has described as "the complete ascendancy of the imagination and fancy over the world of logic, and over our normal ideas of cause and effect, of the way things happen in the world." Furthermore she has emphasised the modern difficulty for us, "as the products of centuries of classical education and scientific outlook, to realize the naturalness with which the early Irish mind passed from the reality of the known to the realm of the fancy."³²

Of course it would be foolish to suggest that fascination with the fantastic was a monopoly of the Celtic world. Rather it is something deeply embedded in universal human experience and takes different forms across time and space. A useful indicator of the range and scale of past preoccupation with the magical and the marvellous is Stith Thompson's monumental *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*.³³ This classification of narrative elements from international

sources includes, for example, dozens of story references to miraculous transportation and magic conveyances, such as boats, canoes, chariots, sleighs, carpets and flying bedsteads. Because of its wealth of folk and early Celtic literature, Ireland is strongly represented in this world cultural index. Tom Peete Cross's *Motif-Index of Early Irish Literature*³⁴ was designed to complement and supplement Stith Thompson's six-volume work and so it follows his method of classification and enumeration. For example, under the category heading 'Magic object affords miraculous transportation,' Cross tabulates thirty sub-sections, ranging from "self-propelling boat (ship)" to "Saint's bachall [staff or crozier] permits him to walk on water."³⁵

Magical air travel is a significant motif in the fabulous tales of Norse mythology.³⁶ The marvellous ship *Skidbladnir* was crafted by the dwarf Dvalin for the weather god Freyr, who belonged to the race of the Vanas, the divinities of water and air. *Skidbladnir* was endowed with powerful magic qualities, so that it could fly through the air as well as sail on the sea, always driven by favourable winds. The ship could also assume great size to carry all the gods and their equipment, yet when required it could be folded up into the smallest size and pushed into a pocket. In the Norse pantheon, the wind god Odin was pictured as rushing through the air on his eight-footed steed. As the souls of the dead were thought to be wafted along on the wings of the storm, Odin was worshipped as the leader of all disembodied spirits. In this character he was most generally known as the Wild Huntsman and originator of the widespread European folklore belief in the Wild Hunt.

Chasse-Galerie is a French Canadian variant of the Wild Hunt theme, in which hunters, wanting to return home quickly, make a pact with the devil to fly their canoe through the air at great speed. They must not invoke the name of God or carry any religious objects, otherwise the canoe will crash to the ground. This story was powerfully visualised by the nineteenth-century artist Henri Julien in his painting "Chasse-Galerie," where the devil is depicted pulling down a sky-borne canoe full of madly paddling hunters!³⁷

Reports of sightings of ships in the sky encompass a thousand years of history. They occur in Canada and in Ireland as late as the final decade of the eighteenth century. In 1796 Simeon Perkins, a merchant and town official of Liverpool, Nova Scotia, recorded in his diary that a fleet of ships had been seen in the air over

the Bay of Fundy. Perkins was a down-to-earth individual and his diary is regarded as an authoritative source of information about life and business in colonial Nova Scotia.³⁸

Wednesday, 12 October 1796

A strange story is going that fleet of ships have been seen in the air in some part of the Bay of Fundy. Mr Darrow is lately from there by land. I enquired of him. He says they were said to be seen at New Minas, at one Mr Ratchford's, by a girl, about sunrise, and that the girl being frightened, called out, and two men that were in the house went out and saw the same sight, being 15 ships and a man forward of them with his hand stretched out. The ships made to the eastward. They were so near that the people saw their sides and ports. My own opinion is that it was only in imagination, as the cloud at sunrise might make some such appearance, which being improved by imagination, might be all they saw.

The ascribing of visionary ships in the sky to unusual cloud formations, atmospheric conditions, or other circumstances linked to the powers of imagination and suggestion are rationalist, reasoning forms of explanation of long-standing. In 1798, two years after the Nova Scotian airships sighting, a similar phenomenon was observed by hundreds of people in the west of Ireland. James Hardiman, a noted nineteenth-century Celticist and historian, witnessed the event as a young boy and later recalled seeing,

a well-defined aerial phenomenon of this kind [fantastical ships] from a rising ground near the mountain of Cruach-Patrick, in Mayo [a holy pilgrimage mountain on the west coast of Ireland]. It was a serene evening in the autumn of 1798. Hundreds who also witnessed the event believed it was supernatural; but it was soon afterwards found to have been caused by the fleet of Admiral Warren, then in pursuit of a French squadron, off the west coast of Ireland.³⁹

The Irish and Canadian sighting dates of 1798 and 1796 are significant. The former was the year of armed risings by the republican United Irishmen, supported in Mayo by an army of revolutionary France, while in Nova Scotia in 1796 there had been considerable anxieties over French privateering raids and the possibility of attack by a French naval squadron.⁴⁰

While remarkable cloudscape could be a natural explanation for aerial visions, it is important to note that clouds are important elements in Christian symbolism and had particular significance for the deeply religious

culture of the Middle Ages. Essentially, as clouds in the heavens were the natural veil of the blue sky, they became a symbol of the unseen God. By extension, in Christian art, the halo or disc of light encircling the head of a holy personage is known as a nimbus, the Latin word for cloud. A hand emerging from a cloud is perhaps the most common symbol of Divine Omnipotence.⁴¹ When Jesus was taken before the Sanhedrin and questioned, he affirmed his Divinity and said, "And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven."⁴² Medieval religious literature and iconography are richly infused with cloud symbolism and reflected, for example, in the title of the fourteenth-century English mystical treatise, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Here the anonymous author insists that the "cloud of unknowing," which lies between God and man, cannot be pierced by the human intellect, but only by "a sharp dart of love."⁴³ Cloud imagery and symbolism have remained part of post-enlightenment religious vocabulary and while given particular expression in hymnody, they are also found in poetry, such as Wordsworth's famous lines "But trailing clouds of glory do we come/ From God, who is our home."⁴⁴ With the growth of interest in Gregorian chant and early church music in recent years, an Irish recording company Gael-Linn, produced in 1989 a CD entitled *Vox De Nube* (Voice from the Cloud). The cover booklet notes that "In our Judaeo-Christian tradition God has always remained in a cloud of unknowing...the Word reverberates to this voice of praise inviting us to link Earth with Heaven. Under the light of the Voice from the Cloud we are drawn into God's own time."⁴⁵ Most recently, in 1998, a remarkable cloud phenomenon was seen in Northern Ireland during the Stormont talks for a political settlement. In the tension-filled hours before politicians finally reached their historic agreement at Castle Buildings late in the afternoon of Good Friday, it was reported that:

An RUC woman guarding Castle Buildings was astonished when she looked into the afternoon sky. "Isn't that strange," she exclaimed, "Look at that cross — it's Good Friday and it's nearly three o'clock." Two thin streaks of cloud had formed a very large white cross in the sky over Castle Buildings. Easter Week had seen the mood at the talks swing between hope and despair.

Belfast Telegraph, 11 April 1998

In the Middle Ages, the visionary appearances of clouds were also regarded as portents or forewarnings charged with both religious and secular meanings. However, whilst medieval culture was permeated with visionary imagination and belief in an other world reality, this is not to suggest that people were incapable of critical judgement in distinguishing between the natural and the supernatural, between wonders and illusions. In *The Medieval Vision*, Carolly Erickson's central theme is the complex nature of perceived reality in the Middle Ages and the difficulties for the modern mind in comprehending the medievals' flexibility of perception.⁴⁶ "Their perceptual range was broader than ours. They were aware of more possibilities because they were less inclined to dismiss any of them as unimaginable."⁴⁷ She aptly illustrates this point by quoting from a thirteenth-century English account of the supposed appearance of an airship to the monks of St Alban's. However, in the end the monks decided that what they had seen was not a supernatural apparition, but a "wonderful and extraordinary" cloud.

About midnight of the day of our Lord's circumcision, the moon being eight days old, and the firmament studded with stars, and the air completely calm, there appeared in the sky, wonderful to relate, the form of a large ship, well-shaped, and of remarkable design and colour. This apparition was seen by some monks of St. Alban's, staying at St. Amphibalus to celebrate the festival, who were looking out to see by the stars if it was the hour for chanting matins, and they at once called together all their friends and followers who were in the house, to see the wonderful apparition. The vessel appeared for a long time, as if it were painted, and really built with planks; but at length it began by degrees to dissolve and disappear, wherefore it was believed to have been a cloud, but a wonderful and extraordinary one.⁴⁸

Though the St Alban's monks concluded that the cloud ship was an extraordinary but natural phenomenon, it was completely characteristic of the medieval way of thinking that their minds were open to supernatural possibilities and miraculous explanations. Because of the multifold and all-encompassing nature of their cultural world, where the visible and invisible, the finite and the infinite were inextricably linked, the monks had an inclusive concept of simultaneous realities that accepted the possibility of their witnessing a super-physical event, a corporeal or even an incorporeal ship in the sky. Thus, Erickson suggests,

the monks, in common with their medieval contemporaries, were capable of "seeing more" than we do because of the significance attributed to vision as a "creative force and as a mode of human understanding."⁴⁹ In short, the acuity and quality of medieval visual perception was different and more holistic than ours. "Here it is our habits of mind which hamper us, accustomed as we are to equate realness with materiality; for us, what is unseen and immaterial is assumed to be unreal until its existence is proved by the verifiable data of the senses."⁵⁰ She further declares that "our lexicon associates visions with mysticism, irrationality, occultism, impracticality and madness. From our point of view, the visionary is a person who sees what isn't there; his visions separate him from reality. In the Middle Ages, visions defined reality...The medieval past is full of visions. Extraordinary appearances — unusual natural configurations, visual portents, dream messages from the dead, divine and informal warnings, intellectual illuminations, visions of the future — everywhere complemented ordinary sight."⁵¹ In conclusion Erickson argues powerfully and eloquently that "Medieval men and women blended the evidence of their senses with firm convictions about the presence and power of unseen creation. Their concept of the real embraced much that we would now call imaginary; planes of truth we perceive as distinct and clashing they saw as concurrent parts of a harmonious whole."⁵²

In medieval Europe, there was no clear distinction between the real and the imaginary. For the people of the Middle Ages, as the Russian medievalist Aron Gurevich has pointed out, "the border between this world and the other was permeable in both directions."⁵³ In a world permeated by symbolism, voyaging ships and boats were loaded with spiritual meanings — from the currachs of Irish monks seeking deserts in the ocean, to vessels in distress being saved by St Nicholas the patron saint of seafarers. It has been suggested that of all medieval clichés, few were so popular as that of the ship in the storm and no miracle was more widespread than that of an intervention by a saint to calm the tempest and save the seafarers.⁵⁴ The potency of the sea lay not only in its real dangers, but also in its symbolic significance, for the sea was emblematic of the world and its temptations. It was perceived as a place of passage for the human soul and could be crossed safely with guidance from God, but could engulf those who ignored the Divine Purpose.⁵⁵ The Ship of the Church, steered by Christ, was of course the

symbolic vessel for bearing the cargo of souls over the sea and navigating the waters of life to salvation. The symbolic connections between ship, church and salvation keyed directly to the powerful maritime symbolism of the Scriptures, from Noah's ark and the story of Jonah, to Christ and the fishermen, boats and storms of the Sea of Gallilee. As a ship's mast and yard was a symbol of the Cross, so the hull of a ship corresponded to the shape of a church building, where the central aisle or nave took its name from the Latin word *navis*, meaning ship. Other material and symbolic connections between ships and the church include the numerous sailor-made models or 'votive ships' suspended or displayed in the churches of maritime Europe. The oldest one, now preserved in the Maritiem Museum Prins Hendrik in Rotterdam, is thought to have originated in the middle of the fifteenth century. In northern Europe, votive ships are found in almost every church in the coastal towns of Scandinavia, together with the towns of the Baltic and North Sea coasts of Germany. Different and often more recently made votive ship models, together with votive ship paintings, are to be seen among the offerings in churches of southern Europe, especially around the shores of the Mediterranean. In contrast, votive ships and pictures are not generally features of churches in Ireland.⁵⁶

In contrast to the terrestrial earth and sea, so the heavenly world of salvation was symbolised by the blue sky. In *Categories of Medieval Culture*, Gurevich describes the religious and ethical significance of earth and sky as a contrasting pair: "The sky was the seat of higher, eternal, ideal life, while the earth, in contrast, was the vale of tears, where sinful man eked out his earthly span. The world beyond the grave was imagined as being just as substantial as the earthly one — more so, indeed, since it was imperishable."⁵⁷

Conceptions of the nature of the heavens varied over time and space. In the early Middle Ages, especially, it was widely considered that the earth was surrounded by seven heavens —

hence today's common phrase, to be in seventh heaven — and their zones included different waters of sea around the world. A homiletic vision of the creation of heaven and hell, *The Evernew Tongue*,⁵⁸ written in Irish in the tenth or eleventh century, describes these waters and the many kinds of seas flanking the earth on every side. They included a "black waveless sea, with the colour of a stagbeetle, so that no ship that has ever reached it has escaped from it, save only one boat by the lightness of its course and the strength of its wind."⁵⁹ Clearly the idea of sea or water in the sky, even as a sort of watery black hole, was something the medieval mind could envisage without difficulty, for of course it was the work of God revealed in the biblical account of Creation. "God said, 'Let there be a vault through the middle of the waters to divide the waters in two.' And so it was. God made the vault, and it divided the waters under the vault from the waters above the vault, God called the vault heaven."⁶⁰

Returning now to the material representation of the eighth-century Irish currach carved on a stone pillar overlooking Bantry Bay in south west Ireland, it is clear that the symbolism of the image can be interpreted in two overlapping ways. Simultaneously and ambiguously it is a Ship of the Church sailing the heavenly seas, which the medieval mind thought of as surrounding the earth, and a Ship of the Church voyaging heavenwards in marvellous flight through the air and the sky.



Beyond Christian symbolism, ideas of the ship have always occupied a significant locus in water-connected world cultures. From womb ship to death ship, it is a remarkable carrier of manifold messages and meanings in the past and in the present. Whether as a titanic micro-cosmic machine, a medieval ship of fools, or a starship voyager boldly going where no one has gone before, the ship is both at the centre and at the margins of our world. It is an enduring cultural symbol and metaphor, deeply embedded in human consciousness.

NOTES

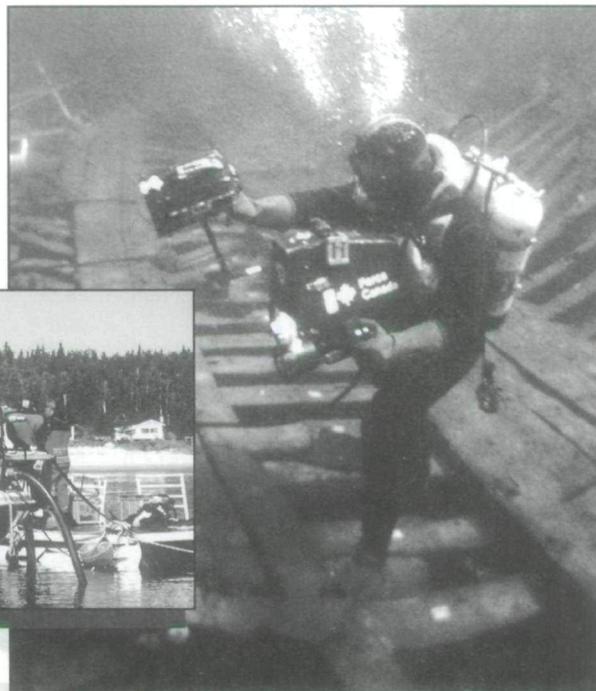
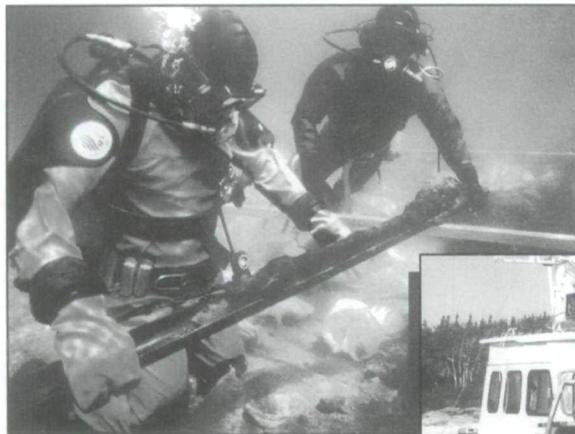
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