Does the Painter Know the Bridle and Bit?: Monastic Art and Literature as Sources for the History of Maritime Technology, 750-1200

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Cover Page Footnote
My title adapted from the section of Plato's Republic (x.601c) in which Socrates defends his rejection of representative arts: “Does the painter know what the bridle and bit ought to be like? Isn't this something that even the makers—the harness-maker and the smith—don't know, but only the horseman who knows how to use them?” The debts accrued during a research project of this nature are inevitably numerous. I must begin by thanking Middlebury College’s Kellogg Fellowship and the panel of faculty adjudicators who arranged funding for this study. Thanks also to the staff of the Bodleian Library in Oxford, to my hosts at Magdalen College, and to Dr. Bernard Gowers of St. Benet's Hall, with whom I corresponded throughout my fellowship. Thanks also to my faculty advisor Louisa Burnham and to Eve Adler Department of Classics at Middlebury. Most especially, I wish to note the contributions of my greatest mentor and strongest advocate, Prof. Jane Chaplin, who read early drafts of the work and provided invaluable critiques. Thanks finally to the "HI Compound," my home away from home at Middlebury, and to Bailey, my dearest friend.
“Does the Painter Know the Bridle and Bit?”:  
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Abstract  
Recent studies of northern European ships and shipping in the Middle Ages have treated manuscript illuminations as reliable sources of technical information concerning vessel construction. On the strength of apparent correlation between the fragmentary archaeological record and the much fuller corpus of illustrations, Dr. Joe Flatman has argued that monastic artists of the tenth through thirteenth centuries interacted closely with ships and understood their form and function. However, the illuminations do not support this view: instead, there is strong evidence that manuscript painters derived their maritime compositions from imitation of earlier illustrations. Similarly, monastic literature exhibits no familiarity with either maritime technology or the practicalities of handling ships at sea. This paper analyzes maritime passages in a widely read hagiographical text, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, which reveals that clerical authors lifted their maritime imagery from Classical Latin sources. Misreadings in manuscripts of the *Navigatio* also suggest that the scribes who copied the piece struggled to comprehend maritime terminology. My conclusions cast into doubt the value of any monastic artform, literary or pictorial, as a source of technical information.
It is a crippling setback to the field of medieval maritime history that so little physical evidence of early European seafaring culture has survived. Only about thirty medieval vessels—including a handful of Viking longships and eighteen late-medieval cogs—had been recovered as of 2000, when the last major excavation was published. Archaeologists have consequently resorted to other means of ‘seeing’ medieval ships. This quest for alternatives led Dr. Joe Flatman to propose in his 2007 dissertation that maritime illuminations in medieval manuscripts might provide highly reliable technical information concerning the construction and fitting-out of medieval ships. Upon examination of several hundred illustrations, Flatman concluded that they correspond with the fragmentary archaeological remains, not just in a general way, but in tremendous detail. He remarked in the introduction of a subsequent monograph, *Ships and Shipping in Medieval Manuscripts*, that “archaeological evidence has demonstrated the inherent accuracy of manuscript illuminations,” with the result that manuscripts “from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries...consistently display surprisingly authentic maritime scenes.” (Flatman [2] 10). Although it is certainly true that medieval maritime illuminations agree with one another, Flatman dramatically overstates his case for conclusive agreement between these images and real medieval vessels. The archaeological record is simply too scanty for the necessary comparisons to be made: organic and ferrous components of a recovered wreck, such as timbers, cordage, canvas, and even the nails that hold a hull together, are usually too degraded to be securely identified, much less matched positively with highly stylized examples from the iconographic record.

However, it is not the place of this paper to object to Flatman’s principal assertion. Rather, my intention is to test an assumption upon which his thesis rests, namely, whether it is plausible...
that the artists behind the illuminations were sufficiently familiar with ships to render them faithfully in illustrations. In this paper, I first compare the illuminations with one another in order to demonstrate that the artists who produced them could and did paint ships without ever having seen vessels in person. Then, I look to administrative and archaeological data to determine whether a monastic artist would have been likely to encounter ships in order to have made a careful study of them. Though I find that the church was indeed intimately tied to the sea, I return to the illuminations to show that even if some painters did in fact witness maritime activities in port or out at sea, then they certainly did not understand what they had seen.

Having disposed of Flatman’s art-historical arguments, I turn finally to art of a different medium and assess the strength of maritime material in the best-known example of medieval Latin sea-literature, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*. I demonstrate that the author of that piece—like the painters—has modelled all his own maritime imagery after pre-existing exempla, mostly borrowed from Roman poetry. Finally, I present evidence from two manuscripts of the *Navigatio* which reveals that the scribes also struggled to comprehend the maritime technical vocabulary. From my close examination of monastic artforms, it emerges that the regular clergy had very little proficiency in seamanship. Therefore, I argue that manuscript illuminations should not be accepted as sources of technical information as hastily as they have been. Although I cannot conclusively overturn Flatman’s thesis, my research shows that it is difficult to reconcile monastic artists’ apparent ignorance of ships and seafaring with the extraordinary technical accuracy the archaeological community wishes to see in their works.

To ensure the validity of the comparative analysis in which I engage, it is necessary that both the illustrations and the literary sources be created by the same class of people, and that these people possess comparable levels of proficiency in their respective media. Since I have focused
on early- and high-medieval secular literature written by Christian monks and clergymen, I have constrained my examination of manuscript illuminations to include only those set down before 1300, because most early medieval manuscripts were produced in monastic scriptoria, whereas the field became increasingly open to laymen in the fourteenth century and after (Clemens and Graham 22). Thus, I am confident that the constituent pieces of both my datasets were created by artists who had comparable exposure to the sea. Additionally, I have looked only at texts and images from northwestern Europe and the British Isles, since the Mediterranean shipbuilding tradition was dramatically different, being descended ultimately from Roman, rather than Viking, techniques.

Flatman offers no explanation, in either of his monographs, of why, or how, medieval artists should have come to possess the extraordinary degree of technical accuracy which he imputes to them. Yet such a momentous claim ought not to be made without any critical assessment of its internal plausibility. It is certainly possible, as Flatman notes, to detect extreme “realism and accuracy” in illustrations of other aspects of medieval culture, “such as costume, architecture, arms, and armor.” Nevertheless, these categories differ, in that all were “common aspects of everyday life, which would have been familiar to almost everyone.” By contrast, “the technicalities of ships and shipbuilding were far less well-known,” so from the outset, Flatman’s theory faces a considerable obstacle (Flatman [2] 10): it seems unlikely that a poorly understood technology should be illustrated accurately by artists uninitiated into its finer points. By way of a solution to this knotty point, Flatman implies that, for one reason or another, illuminators interacted with ships more often and more closely than the average medieval European. Nor was he the first to suggest a peculiar affinity between artists and the maritime environment. Christine Villain-Gandossi argued more than a decade earlier that illuminators copied real vessels. Like Flatman, she bases her argument on “recent archaeological discoveries,” which she believes “have often underlined
the accuracy of depiction” (Villain-Gandossi 170). Conspicuously, though, she offers no examples to support her assertion. She proposes, furthermore, that “the oddest features” of an illumination—such as novel steering gear or an otherwise unattested sail plan—“if consistently represented, probably reflect reality” (171). This is an extremely tenuous claim. For as Richard Unger explains in his 1991 monograph *The Art of Medieval Technology*, “artists often did not comprehend what they were showing,” and thus, “the more complex the object, the less trustworthy the image” (9).

Since ships, surely, were among the most complex of all medieval machines, Villain-Gandossi’s hypothesis, although attractive to the artifact-starved maritime archaeologist, seems a violation of Ockham’s Razor. The repetition of a distinctive feature across geographically and temporally isolated artworks more probably points to the existence of a widely-circulating archetype, which contained that same peculiar element. Under this paradigm, the ‘accuracy’ of a derivative illumination depends more on the quality of the archetype than on any special familiarity with ships on the part of the illuminator.

Since the publication of Unger’s monograph, it has been accepted that illuminators were accustomed to emulate one another’s work, especially when they painted complex or unfamiliar devices. Indeed, Unger shows that some of the very manuscripts upon which Flatman bases his analyses are directly descended from one another (13). This tendency to borrow is clearly visible in a series of four richly decorated English bestiaries (figs. 1-4) dating to between 1175 and 1250. Each of these manuscripts includes a section on marine creatures, in which the illuminator has attempted a whale with a small sailboat run aground on its back. The repetition of this motif in itself would be unremarkable—the whale is a conventional Christian symbol of God’s terrible and unknowable power in the depths—except that the four images are nearly identical. Each formidably armored whale is rendered from the side, facing left, with vertical flukes curled
underneath its torso. All four gorge themselves on a school of smaller fish, the tails of which protrude out of the monsters’ gaping mouths. Meanwhile, aboard the double-ended skiff in the upper half of each frame, sailors struggle to restep the mast, one straining to reseat the fallen timber in its footing, another climbing the stays to adjust the sails. At the stern, a helmsman plies his steering oar over the starboard gunwale. Finally, in two of the illuminations, one member of the crew has alighted on the whale’s back, where, crouching on his right knee, he kindles a fire in order to boil water in a cauldron. So alike are these paintings that the artists responsible have certainly borrowed their designs from a common pool of archetypes, yet no two of the resulting paintings belong to the same hand.

Although few illuminations are so explicitly derivative as these, a less intensive form of borrowing, whereby artists selectively appropriated only a few elements from their models, informed the composition of many twelfth- and thirteenth-century maritime paintings. As Unger writes, “the illustration of books and specifically the Bible was firmly established by 1100, and once established, the tradition was imitated” (62). Consequently, practically every Gothic picture Bible contains an illustration of the biblical Flood narrative, and to Unger, the similarities between these renderings “suggest not only common ancestry but direct borrowing” (66). For example, the pair of line-drawings depicting Noah’s ark at fol. 66r of the tenth-century Junius Manuscript (BL MS. Junius 11; fig. 5) appear to have been copied by the illustrator of the twelfth-century Winchester Psalter (BL Cotton Nero MS. C.IV f.3r; fig. 6). In the Junius drawing, God gives his instructions to Noah, with his right hand outstretched and a Bible clasped in his left; then, in a second panel, the patriarch begins work on the Ark, swinging a tool called a T-axe high over his head. The Winchester Painter, in turn, reproduces both scenes, only replacing the anachronistic codex bible from his archetype with a more suitably archaic scroll. If these examples are
representative, it would appear that the artistic culture of the scriptoria placed a stronger emphasis on duplication than on innovation. Nor do these illuminations themselves provide any evidence that the artists necessarily interacted with ships, since other avenues of obtaining information concerning hull-construction and rigging were plainly readily available to them. Thus, there is no reason a priori to credit the technical information in maritime art.

It is not necessarily the case, though, that monastic artists were wholly unfamiliar with the sea. On the contrary, much recent scholarship has examined the possibility of other interfaces between the clerical and maritime worlds. Commentators have found ample evidence that members of the religious orders and clergy had opportunities to encounter ships, seafarers, and port-cities. Flatman finds evidence in the chronicle histories that “regular, long-distance journeys were...made by groups of religious individuals” in order to fulfill commissions on behalf of the Church and to engage in diplomacy between kingdoms. For this reason, he supposes, “medieval clergy, monks, and even nuns were commonly cosmopolitan, well-educated, well-travelled members of the aristocracy, and were just as, if not more, familiar with ships as the lay population” (29). Similarly, numerous descriptions of shipbuilding in monastic literature have led some scholars to imagine that Christian authors themselves were well-versed in northern European methods of hull-construction, or at the very least that they had interacted closely with shipwrights. That some churchmen travelled by sea is not in doubt: we need only look to the various crusader histories or the Vita of the Celtic saint Birinus to know how routinely some clerics went aboard as passengers. The essential question, rather, is whether monastic artwork is consistent in displaying the extraordinary degree of maritimity Flatman sees in it.

Most recent scholarship has doubted whether particular knowledge of maritime technology permeated much beyond the specialized class of shipwrights, sailors, and portside auxiliary
workers. Archaeologist Ian Friel has argued that medieval Europe was a “largely an agrarian society,” in which “one should not overestimate the [economic] importance of shipping” (Friel [1] 41). Sebastian Sobecki, a specialist in medieval sea-literature, concurs, cautioning that maritimity was not widespread: “in marked contrast” to the sophisticated shipbuilding tradition, he writes, “stands the scarce knowledge of the sea itself in many of its non-Mediterranean observers. Much was conjectured and little was known for certain” (29-30). Sobecki’s view certainly seems to capture the state of technical knowledge as presented in maritime illuminations, for in spite of Flatman’s arguments to the contrary, medieval paintings do not support his view of extreme technical literacy. For example, the disembodied half-ship depicted in the Winchester Flood cycle (fig. 6) displays grave confusion about the process of hull-construction. Here, Noah’s Ark has been built somewhat in the manner of a brick wall, with three incomplete courses of interlocking strakes terminating about midships in a jarring vertical severance. The only way to achieve such a shape out of wood would be to build the vessel from stem-to-stern, whereas any real shipwright begins his work at the bottom by laying a keel, and then works his way upwards. Such a keel timber is altogether absent from this ship.

Illustrations of Noah at work in his capacity as shipwright are extremely common, and some seem to offer rare glimpses of the medieval practice of shipbuilding. For instance, Noah usually carries his distinctive T-axe, a style of blade which archaeologists have uncovered in maritime contexts, indicating that it was a genuine component of the shipwright’s kit (Hutchinson 22). However, evidence from terrestrial archaeological sites has shown that T-axes were no less ubiquitous among medieval house-carpenters. Thus, any apparent association between Noah and a particular tool should not be taken as proof of the illuminators’ special insight. Indeed, no surviving illumination depicts any woodworking procedure unique to shipbuilding, though many
must have existed (Unger 86). Flatman argues that Noah is often shown employing “the primary skills of...carpenters”—such as planing beams to build frames—because these “were commonly known in medieval society” on account of their use in housebuilding (136). Yet if we are to believe his contention that illuminators really did understand the construction of ships, then it is difficult to explain the total invisibility of more specialized tasks, like caulking or mast-making. Flatman explains that these “remained generally unknown by ordinary craftsmen” (Flatman [2] 137) but that should be no issue, since illuminators are supposed to have had greater-than-ordinary maritimity.

One last chance of rehabilitation remains for Flatman’s argument, if it can be proven that clerics participated in the handling of vessels at sea. If that were the case, we might still accept their testimony in matters of navigation, even if we must discard their treatments of shipbuilding. Robert Miller has identified many possible interactions between seamen and clergymen ashore in medieval Britain, largely on the basis of archaeological and administrative data. He notes, for example, that no dock in the port of London was more than three-hundred meters from a parish church, and that St. Paul’s Cathedral at one time owned a modest fleet, which it used to transport stone (133). Likewise, Tintern Abbey is known to have had its own quay reserved at Gloucester for the conveyance of its private trade, while each of the Channel-coast ‘Cinque Ports’ fell under the exclusive control of an abbey appointed by the Crown to oversee religious observance in that city (134, 139). Lastly, Miller shows irrefutably that mariners were present in the congregation at Exeter Cathedral, since the Latin liturgy composed for that community includes a unique ‘Oratio ad Collectam pro Navigantibus Fidelibus [Collect on Behalf of Faithful Sailors],’ which would not have been necessary had sailors and sailors’ families not been among the parishioners (145). Still, Miller falls short of placing clerics actually aboard ships, and he therefore cannot offer proof
that illuminators necessarily engaged with vessels. It is clear enough, then, that churchmen could have interacted with sailors ashore. Yet it is extremely improbable that they engaged with vessels closely enough to understand them as functional machines: their illustrations of ships are too full of technological inconsistencies and impossibilities. In consequence, even if the literary evidence—to which we now turn—should recommend that clergymen were sufficiently well-versed in maritime affairs to be taken as reliable witnesses of technological development, the task of determining the form and function of vessel components from the artistic record would be futile. Worse still, the corpus of Latin literature indicates just as strongly as the illuminations that when monastic artists depicted ships, they were (as the expression goes) entirely ‘out to sea.’

Previous assessments of monastic literature have taken a skeptical view of its value to the maritime historian. Flatman avoids wading into the literary record altogether, and although he claims that “illuminations regularly correlate extremely well with the documentary...records,” he fails to engage in any relevant comparisons (Flatman [2] 33). Friel, who is practically the only commentator to make a substantial foray into the documentary sources, observes that neither technical shipbuilding plans nor theoretical treatises on naval architecture existed until the fifteenth century. Ships and fleets for which detailed records do survive were invariably either the personal vessels of monarchs or freight- haulers of extraordinary economic importance, with the result that they should not be taken as representative. Friel gives only passing mention to true ‘literary’ sources, which he deems “potential sources of technical information” that can “rarely be taken at face value” (Friel [2] 14-16).

The remaining portion of this paper is an attempt to tap into what Friel might describe as the ‘hidden value’ of a widely read extra-biblical text, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*. The story is a very ancient one: inhabitants of St. Brendan’s native County Galloway had probably propagated
Latin *Vitae* of their patron within a few decades of his death in the sixth century, and it appears from linguistic evidence that these oral legends were codified by an eighth- or ninth-century cleric from the Rhineland. Through the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, Brendan’s legend spread rapidly across the Continent and into Britain, and its enduring popularity is attested by the fact that it survives in 120 manuscripts and fragments, dating to all periods from the tenth through fifteenth centuries and covering the full geographic sweep of Latin Europe (Selmer 178). The richness of the text’s transmission history enables us not only to assess the original author’s maritimity, but also to critique the technical literacy of the scribes who subsequently copied the work.

The narrative of Brendan’s voyage to the Promised Land of the Saints takes the form of a Christianized prose-epic, modeled loosely on the Homeric *Odyssey* and its Roman descendant, the *Aeneid* (Selmer xviii, xxx). Like its classical precedents, the *Navigatio* is punctuated by episodes of overseas voyage between magical islands, on which Brendan encounters a whale, a gryphon, a village of giant blacksmiths, and even the disciple Judas Iscariot. To accommodate this motif, the author opens his narrative with Brendan at work building a hide-bound *currach* for himself and his fourteen chosen companions: “When they had taken up their iron tools,” the author writes, “Brendan and the monks who came with him made a light craft, with ribs and a keel made of timber, as is traditional in those parts [*fecerunt naviculam levissimam, costatam et columnatam ex silva, sicut mos est in illis partibus*]” (iv.5-8).¹ They “lined these frames with cowhides tanned in oak bark [*cooperuerunt illam coriis bovinis rubricatis in roborina cortice*],” “set a mast in the mast in the middle of the vessel, with a sail fixed to it [*arborem etiam posuerut in medio navis fixam et velam*],” and prepared to put out to sea (iv.13-14). On the basis of this description, the twentieth-century adventurer Tim Severin famously built a replica of Brendan’s skin-boat, in which he sailed across the Atlantic Ocean. The success of Severin’s sea-trial speaks to the
extraordinary character of the *Navigatio*: no other surviving document of northern European boatbuilding attains to nearly the same degree of detail.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to assume that the episode corresponds to genuine ninth-century construction techniques. Instead, like many medieval texts, the *Navigatio* exhibits strong literary imitativeness, particularly in its maritime scenes. Medieval Latinists relied heavily upon stock phrases, which served writer in much the same way that an exemplar could serve an illuminator: with the help of a good enough model, even the most inveterate landlubber could paint—or write—a ship. Very often, these stock phrases were lifted verbatim from classical sources, so an author need not know anything about seamanship to have deployed them. Carl Selmer, who prepared the now-standard edition of the *Navigatio*, finds many such instances of borrowing in the boatbuilding scene (*Intr.* to *Nav.Sanc.Bren*. xxiv): he notes, for example, that the order of operations which Brendan closely parallels a similar episode in the *Odyssey*, in which the Ithacan hero builds a raft and escapes the island of Calypso. Just as Brendan’s companions took up *ferramentis*, Homer describes the various axes, augers, and hammers Odysseus uses to build his vessel. Then, with his timbers prepared, he begins to shape the vessel: first he

- set up the decking, which he fixed to the numerous ribs, finishing off the gunwales with long timbers down the sides. Next, he made a mast and a yardarm joined to it. Finally, he
- fashioned a steering-oar, that he might keep the raft on course.² (*Hom. Od.* v.52-55)

The author of the *Navigatio* would have had no means of accessing the original Homeric Greek, nor even a full Latin translation of the poem, since none was available until the fifteenth century. It is nevertheless possible that he has borrowed Homer’s schematic building plan from an indirect source, since fragments of the *Odyssey* could have been transmitted in other texts.
Classical precedent may have dictated the choice of materials used in the construction of Brendan’s currach, too. Although skin-boats seldom appear elsewhere in medieval literature, writers in the ancient world invariably associated currachs with the British Isles. Both Pliny and Caesar, key classical auctores on British culture, explain in some detail the hull-construction techniques involved in building such a vessel, and the Navigatio author may have borrowed terminology from either writer. Pliny reports in his Historia Naturalis that “the Britons put out to sea in wickerwork boats wrapped up in hide [Britannos vitilis navigiis corio circumstutis navigare]” and sailed to distant islands, whence the historian supposes they retrieved the tin which they famously exported to Rome (Plin. iv.104). Since Pliny’s work appears in the catalogs of all the major monastic libraries, and since it was eagerly consulted by many medieval scholars, it is conceivable that the Navigatio author borrowed his term coriis directly from Pliny’s corio.

Comparison to the account of boatbuilding in Caesar’s De Bello Civili is even more instructive, but it is also more difficult in this case to prove the feasibility of borrowing, since that text was quite rare in the Middle Ages. A copy is attested, though, at Fleury in northern France, near enough to the Navigatio author’s presumptive home turf that he could actually have mined Caesar for loan-words (Reynolds 88, 100). In the first book of his commentary, the general recalls ordering his soldiers “to make boats of the sort about which his experience of Britain some years prior had taught him”: “First,” he says, “they prepared keels and then frames of a light material [statumina ex levi materia]” (Caes. i.54). Caesar’s word levi, ‘light,’ may have been amplified by our medieval author to yield levissimam, ‘very light.’ Moreover, like Pliny, Caesar specifies that the Britons made their boats out of corio: “the rest of the ship’s body,” he says, “was woven out of wicker and covered with leather [reliquum corpus navium viminibus contextum coriis]}
integebatur]” (Caes. i.54). Even though only two positive verbal parallels link the medieval text to an ancient source, the correspondence is too close, I think, to be entirely coincidental.

If certain classical sources did in fact influence the *Navigatio* author, it is nevertheless certainly true that he has also introduced Latin terms for the various procedures and technical components involved in building a currach, suggesting that he may have had some personal knowledge of the process. For example, the adjective *costatam*, which is used to express the rib-like framing of Brendan’s vessel, is extremely scarce in Classical Latin, appearing exclusively in Varro’s *Rerum Rusticarum*, a source unknown to medieval Europe (Reynolds 113). It could have been coined, though, by using the more familiar noun *costa*, meaning ‘rib,’ in a participial form, so it may be the case that the *Navigatio* author devised it himself to describe building practices which he knew firsthand. Likewise, in his descriptions of Brendan navigating out at sea, the author exhibits keen awareness of sail-handling techniques, though he occasionally relies on classical idioms to explain them. For instance, he distinctly counts the sail among the “things which are necessary to steer a ship [*vela et cetera quae ad gubernationem navis pertinent*],” as if he knows that a skilled navigator could manipulate the canvas to turn a single-masted ship without the service of a rudder (iv.14). Still, simultaneous omissions problematize this view: that same long and awkward relative clause reads suspiciously like a prevarication which merely conceals the writer’s ignorance of the proper terms for steering gear. Elsewhere, Brendan commands his companions to “ease the sails [*laxate vela*],” an absurd command, surely, since earlier the boat had only one mast and one sail. Here, the impossible phraseology may be owed to Vergil—who uses the expression “*laxare rudentes*” in the Aeneid to describe the same situation (*Aen. iii.267*)—or perhaps Ovid, the only classical *auctor* to use *laxare* of sails in the imperative (*Pont. IV.ix.73*).
It seems, therefore, that the Navigatio author’s maritimity was at best limited: occasionally, he provides an exciting glimmer of medieval innovation, but he falls back upon on his classical learning to fill the gaps in his account. Yet if the author’s own knowledge at times seems hazy, that of the monks who copied the Navigatio pales by comparison. Although Selmer describes the text as “rather homogenous” across its surviving copies, two examples housed at the Bodleian Library in Oxford contain striking misreadings in the boatbuilding episode (xxvi). The earlier of these, a tenth-century copy found in MS. Laud Misc. 410 (ff.40v-68r), is generally quite clear, although two small omissions indicate that the scribe was confused by the shipbuilding episode. First, in the knotty line about the framing of the hull, he collapses the phrase “costatam et columnatam ex silva” into “costatam ex columnatam” (Laud Misc. 410 f.43r). According to this language, Brendan’s hull is simply “ribbed with columns,” and although this remains an acceptable description of the framing process, it removes any information concerning the material out of which the ribs were made. Likewise, when the original text speaks of “cowhides tanned in oak bark [coriis bovinis rubricatis in roborina cortice],” this scribe omits the final three words, thereby diminishing the force of the word rubricatis from ‘tanned’ to simply ‘reddened,’ its more usual definition in Classical Latin (Laud Misc. 410 f.43r). This omission need not necessarily betray the scribe’s ignorance of tannery, but it is curious that the most diagnostic words have slipped out of the text. However, beyond these small errors, Laud Misc. 410 is legible enough that it served as one of the principal witnesses for Selmer’s edition.

By contrast, a twelfth-century copy (Laud Misc. 44 ff.27v-49v) contains flagrant errors and numerous lacunae. The text has been written out in uneven Gothic miniscule by an inexperienced copyist, whose system of abbreviation is inconsistent and whose Latinity is dubious. Several lines are entirely illegible, and even where the scribe’s characters can be made out, errors of grammar
and spelling abound. What is more, he has no command of maritime terminology: where Selmer’s text reads “vix potuissem puppim aut proram navicule aspicere,” the scribe gives “vir potuissem pupim aut pram navicula videre,” not only liberally changing the main verb and mistaking the adverb vix for the noun vir, but more significantly, also misspelling the words for ‘quarterdeck’ and ‘bow.’ A little below, he mistakes ferramentis, the iron tools Brendan’s followers use to build the currach, for the first-person plural verb ‘we carry,’ ferramus, which makes no grammatical sense. When he comes to the framing of the currach, the scribe is utterly at a loss: in the line “fecerunt naviculam levissimam costatam et colunmatam ex silva,” he omits the initial ‘c’ of costatam, changes columnatam to colupnatam, and reads ex silva as one word, erivio, which is meaningless (Laud Misc. 44 f.30r). Worse still, he misreads the author’s statement that the voyagers “stored away two spare hides out of all those prepared for the boat [miserunt duas alias paraturas navis de aliis coriis],” leaving out the ‘i’ in the word alias. Thus revised, the line means, “they added two wings [duas alas] to the boat made out of other hides,” and the scribe’s mistake here is more pernicious, I think, than the simple omission of a letter: he has fundamentally misunderstood the meaning of the Latin, substituting one real, grammatically appropriate word for another (Laud Misc. 44 f.30r). In his defense, “duas alas” is the more logical alternative—wings invariably come in pairs—but with even the slightest knowledge of boats, he ought to have worried that alae have no place in a maritime context.

When the scribe finally reaches the conclusion of the boatbuilding episode, he avoids all discussion of Brendan’s sails and steering gear. Instead, he drastically truncates a crucial sentence: thus, the scribe recounts that Brendan “set a mast in the middle of the vessel [Arborem quoque posuerunt in medio navis].” but this manuscript does not include any information about the sail fixed to that mast or any of the “other things which are necessary to steer a ship [fixam et velum et
cetera que ad gubernationem navis pertinent)” (Laud Misc. 44 f.30v). It is possible that the ten words left out are the consequence of a line-skip, as if the scribe’s eye passed over a whole line of text in the exemplar from which he copied; indeed, our scribe averages about eight to ten words in per line in his own writing, and we may suppose that his exemplar was similar. Yet in light of the fact that the sentence as the scribe presents it is grammatically complete and intelligible, and in light of the scribe’s dire lack of maritiminity elsewhere, it may be that the dense string of nautical terms in the exemplar simply baffled him, with the result that he willfully omitted them. In comparison with the much more meticulously executed Laud Misc. 410, this twelfth-century scribe’s work seems to have been particularly poor. Yet even if a copyist of average skill lay somewhere between these two extremes, we ought not to place excessive faith in the scribes to furnish intelligible technical information. Just like the authors whose works they copied, monastic scribes were evidently confused by the finer points of the maritime vocabulary. But unlike the authors, the copyists could not conceal their ignorance beneath quotations from classical authors. In the two examples we have examined, their errors show through clearly and reveal the true paucity of the regular clergy’s maritiminity.

At the very end of the golden age of manuscript production in the fifteenth century, demand for copies of the Navigatio Sancti Brendani suddenly soared, and new manuscripts were produced by the dozens (Selmer 178). By that time, merchants in the Italian Maritime Republics had begun to keep detailed records of the materials and labor that had gone into the creation of their fleets, and shipwrights had devised elaborate methods of standardizing their work. So, to readers at the end of the Middle Ages, whose contemporaries would very shortly set off on transoceanic missions of discovery aboard technologically advanced vessels, such a crude skiff as Brendan’s must have seemed wildly anachronistic. Yet as my interrogation of the documentary sources has revealed,
the average consumer of Latin literature in the six centuries preceding may not have known any better. The level of sophistication in medieval discussions of maritime technology is extremely low, and practically all the information available to a Latinist came from antiquated classical sources, not from direct observation of real vessels. Christian authors made no attempt to edit that source material he provided for plausibility or applicability, and even the best-informed medieval writers failed to effect a complete escape from the paradigm of literary borrowing.

We must concede that in the several cases we have examined, the monastic artists in question can be excused for their lack of technical knowledge. Outside England, very few monks lived in areas where they could routinely interact with ships: our two manuscripts of the *Navigatio*, for example, are of central-German provenance, so unless the scribes had cause to travel far away from their landlocked homes, they may never even have encountered ships. In this respect, a land-bound copyist’s situation was no different from that of a central-German or central-French manuscript illuminator. Only those clergymen who inhabited coastal regions can be assumed to have seen ships routinely. Meanwhile, if the degree of maritimity was so low among Continental monks generally, then surely we must rethink the value of the many central-French illustrations upon which Dr. Flatman bases his analyses. Nor do any of the examples of monastic art which I have examined claim to represent the medieval world faithfully: all are in fact deliberately and overtly archaizing, the paintings emulating earlier paintings, and the *Navigatio* imitating classical writing. My conclusion must therefore be to undermine the two principal bodies of evidence which have been used to fill holes in the maritime archaeological record. Both have proven unreliable, so we must continue to look elsewhere in our quest to ‘see’ medieval ships.
Appendix: Figures

Figure 1: The St. Petersburg Bestiary (National Library of Russia MS. Lat.Q.v.V.1 f.71r), Lincolnshire, ca. 1180-1190.

Figure 2: The Ashmole Bestiary (Bodleian Library MS. Ashmole 1511 f.86v), Peterborough(?), ca. 1175-1225.

Figure 3: Bodleian Library MS. Bodl. 746 f.107r, English, ca. 1225-1250.

Figure 4: The Harley Bestiary, BL MS. Harley 4751 f.69r, English, ca. 1175-1225.
Figure 5: The ‘Junius’ Manuscript (Bodleian Library MS. Junius 11 f.65r), Canterbury(?), ca. 1000.

Figure 6: The Winchester Psalter (BL MS. Cotton Nero C.IV f.3r), English, ca. 1121-1161.
All translations of Latin text are my own; my readings have not deviated from the printed editions cited, except where discrepancies in the manuscript have suggested alternate readings.

Translations of the Greek are adapted from E. V. Rieu’s prose translation.


In my transcriptions of manuscript sources, I have silently emended truncations and abbreviations to achieve standard Latin orthography by restoring the omitted letters, except where the scribe has erred. However, I have preserved acceptable alternate spellings imposed by the scribes, e.g., ‘butyro’ for ‘butiro’.
Works Cited

Manuscript Sources

Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Laud Misc. 44 (German, 12th cent.), ff. 27v-54r.

---., MS. Laud Misc. 410 (German, 11th cent.), ff. 40v-68r.

Edited Texts


Secondary Literature


