

The search for Brazil (1)

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“A SAILOR named Pedro de Velasco, a Galician, told Columbus in Murcia that, going on an Irish voyage, they were sailing and running so much to the north-west that they saw land to the west of Ireland, and those who were in that voyage believed it must be what a certain Hernan Dolinos sought to discover.”

So wrote Bartolomé de las Casas in his “Historia de las Indias”, a work compiled in Latin using the notebooks of Christopher Columbus shortly after his death. I take it, along with a good deal of what follows, from James Williamson’s book “The Voyages of the Cabots”.

The fever of Atlantic exploration had resulted in the discovery and settlement of Madeira in 1419, the Azores in 1431, and the Cape Verde Islands in 1456. Columbus, convinced that there was a western route to India, was now conducting careful research. He was as interested in northern routes as in southern ones, and appears to have sailed a hundred leagues beyond Iceland in 1477 before turning back.

De las Casas tells us more about the Galician in Murcia. “Pedro de Velasco, an inhabitant of Palos, assured the same Christopher Columbus, in the monastery of Sancta María de la Rábida, that they had set out from the island of Fayal, and went 150 leagues with the *viento lebechio* (the north-west wind), and on putting about they discovered the island of Flores, guiding themselves by the numbers of birds they saw flying thither, for they recognized them as land birds and not seabirds, and so they judged that they must go to some land to sleep.”

Fayal and Flores are the most westerly of the Azores, a third of the way across from Lisbon to New York. De las Casas goes on: “Afterwards, they say, they went so far to the north-east that they reached Cape Clear, which is in Ireland towards the east, where they observed the west winds to blow very strongly and the sea was very smooth, from which they believed that it must be because of the land that must be there, which gave shelter in the western direction; which they did not follow up by going to discover it, for it was in August, and they feared the onset of winter.

“This, it is said, was forty years before Columbus discovered our Indies. In agreement with this is what a decrepit sailor told the said Columbus, in the port of Santa Maria, that in a voyage that he had made to Ireland he had seen a land that others believed to exist there, and they imagined it was Tartary which projected that way by the east, which I believe truly was that which we now call the Bacallaos, which they could not approach on account of the terrible winds.”

The Bacallaos appears to have been what we now call Newfoundland.

Columbus was told by different mariners of how they had found canes in the sea which could contain in their cavities three *azumbres* (half-gallons) of water or wine, and pieces of wood artificially worked, but not by iron tools. In the Azores, he learned, the sea had brought up hollowed trunks or canoes with a moveable covering, and the corpses of two men who seemed very broad in the face, of an appearance “different from that of Christians”.

So, bit by bit, information was pieced together, conclusions reached, maps made – from ancient writers, modern scientists, landmen’s folklore, seamen’s tales, empirical evidence. Some of it has survived. We read about places, some with names, some without. We look at old maps showing islands, some of which are named, some of which are not. And we have names, which appear here and there in the stories, here and there on the maps.

The most wonderful of these is Brazil, and it’s Brazil, strange to say, that de Velasco and the “decrepit sailor” spoke of to the west of Ireland, for it’s marked there on maps. It’s a Gaelic name, in Irish *Í Breasail* – “Breasal’s Island” – but usually spelt in English “Hy Brazil”.

Í simply means an island and of course we have our own *Í* in Scotland – *Ì Chaluim Chille*, “St Columba’s Island”. In the seventeenth century John Morison of Bragar referred to Lewis as “the Nito”, presumably meaning *an Ì a-Tuath*, “the Northern Island”.

Breasal, pronounced “brassal”, meaning “brave or strong in conflict”, was a very common name in early Ireland. Many early kings bore it, the most famous being *Breasal Béalach*, “Breasal Big-Mouth”, who ruled over Leinster. In the later middle ages the name was favoured by the O Kellys and O Maddens of Connacht. There was a St Breasal (feast-day 18 May), whose grave is pointed out in Aranmore, so I suppose *Í Breasail* was named after him. It was, after all, an island of the imagination, or a spiritual concept like heaven, but to those who believed they had seen it or landed upon it, it was real.

The earliest evidence for St Breasal’s Isle is not to be found in Gaelic literature at all but in the work of medieval cartographers. A map made by Angelino de Dalorto of Genoa in 1325 shows it in the place where it was to remain pretty much fixed for centuries, about a hundred miles west of the mouth of the Shannon, with the legend *Insula de moutonis sive de brazile*, which I take to mean “Isle of sheep or of Brazil”. A map by Angelino Dulcert of 1339 has it as *Insula de Brazil*. A Catalan portolano of 1350 calls it simply *Illa de brezill*. The Pizigani brothers’ map of 1367 calls it *Brazir* (*l* and *r* are often confused in languages such as Portuguese). And a map of 1459 made by Fra Mauro, a Venetian friar, has it as *I. del Berzel, anesta isola de hibernia, son dite Fortunata*: “The Isle of the Berzel, a noble isle of Ireland, also called Fortunate.”

He will have got this idea from the “Fortunate Isles” (*Fortunatae Insulae*) of the seventh-century Isidore of Seville, or from the tenth-century *Navigatio* of St Brendan, a Gaelic-speaking monk of Clonfert. The *Navigatio* was devoured and dissected by Columbus and the other explorers and cartographers of his day.

So, even though it never existed, the most reliable accounts of the search for St Breasal’s Isle pre-date our surviving stories about it. Maps, search, stories – it’s upside-down, somehow. What this suggests is that our stories, though recorded in recent times, go back at least to the early fourteenth century. The earliest of any substance appears to be in a manuscript history of Ireland, dated 1636, in the Royal Irish Academy, quoted in

James Hardiman's "Irish Minstrelsy" of 1831. Hardiman is actually commenting on a couple of lines in a song called in Irish "A Ghrádh agus a Rúin Dhil" and in English "Mary of Meelick":

*Mo chreach ghéur bhrónach! gan me a's mo stóirín,
'S an oileán shiar, aédrach, aoibhinn!*

It means something like "It's my sharp anguished grief that I and my beloved are not in the happy cheerful western island." It provokes Hardiman into a long footnote to the effect that "it was usual with our bards to wish for retirement, with the objects of their love, in some shady grove, or sequestered island, which often existed in idea", but which "the inhabitants of the Western coasts of Ireland, think they frequently see emerging from the ocean, and suppose to be bound by some ancient power of enchantment".

He then quotes from the manuscript. It speaks of the Tuatha Dé Danann expelling the Fir Bolg to islands off the coast of Ireland, and the Clanna Mílidh doing the same to the Tuatha Dé Danann. In other words, each wave of invaders expels the one before. People on the coast of Mayo sometimes see such an island, says the writer, and it can also be seen from St Helen Head in Donegal. "Likewise severall seamen have discovered it att sea, as they have sailed on the western coasts of Ireland; one of whom, named Captain Rich, who lives about Dublin, of late years had a view of the land, and was so neere that he discovered a harbour, as he supposed, by the two head lands on either side thereof, but could never make to land, although when he had lost sight thereof in a mist which fell upon him, he held the same course several hours afterward.

"This I am bold to insert by the way, because I have heard a relation hereof from many credible persons, and particularly from the said Captain Rich, allsoe in many old mapps, (especially mapps of Europe, or mapps of the world,) you shall find it by the name of *O' Brasile*, under the longitude of 03° 00', and the latitude of 50° 20'. So that it may be, those famous enchanter now inhabitt there, and by their magick skill conceal their iland from forraigners."

The writer of the manuscript displays his scepticism by adding: "Yett this is my own conceipt, and would have it taken for no other."

The coordinates he supplies (assuming that by 03° he means 30°) put the island 800 miles north of the Azores, halfway between Land's End and Newfoundland. The name *O' Brasile* is not surprising, because *Í Breasail* was always likely to be misunderstood as *Uí Bhreasail*, a tribal or even district name, literally "the O'Breasails" or "the grandchildren of Breasal" – in our Gaelic it would be *Oghaichean Bhreasail*.

As a result of earlier stories of that kind, then, not to mention "old mapps", the search for Hy Brazil had begun in earnest twelve years before Columbus set out on his epic voyage. The following, translated from the Latin of a mutilated manuscript in Cambridge (the "Itinerarium" of William of Worcester), is the first record of any English expedition for the discovery of unknown lands in the Atlantic. "1480, on July 15, the ship . . . of John Jay the younger, of the burden of 80 tons, began a voyage from the port of the Kingrode of Bristol to the island of Brasylle in the western part of Ireland, to traverse the seas . . . and Thlyde is the most expert shipmaster of all England; and news came to Bristol on Monday the 18th of September that in the said ship they sailed the seas for about nine months, and did not find the island, but were driven back by storms to a port . . . in Ireland for the refreshment of the ship and the men."

Note that "nine months" should read "nine weeks". And that "Thlyde" was no Englishman, but a Welshman usually known as John Lloyd. An experienced Atlantic navigator, his name appears in customs ledgers as early as 1461, his employer, John Jay, being a prominent merchant who had connections with Portugal and Iceland.

In light of all this, it's not surprising to discover that when Columbus set sail from a little Spanish port in 1492, one of his sailors was logged as *Guliero Ires natural de Galuy en Irlanda*. "William the Irishman, a native of Galway in Ireland."

Next time I will show how the Bristol merchants dispatched seven more expeditions in search of Brazil, and how, in the most circumstantial account of all, its natives were alleged to be speakers of Scottish Gaelic.

13 October 2006