

Corryvreckan

The name 'Corryvreckan' probably derives from two words 'Coire' which in Irish means cauldron and 'Breccán' or 'Breacan', which is taken to be a proper noun i.e. the name of an individual called Breccán. Although this has also been translated as 'speckled' from the adjective *brecc* 'spotted, speckled' etc. combined with the suffix of place – *an*.

There is an Old Irish text known as Cormac's Glossary written by the then King and Bishop of Cashel, Cormac mac Cuilennáin who died in the year 908. The text is written in the form of Dictionary combined with an encyclopaedia. In it are various attempts at providing explanations, meanings and the significances of various words. At entry 323 it provides probably the fullest description of the *Coire Breccáin* of the early Irish material,

a great whirlpool which is between Ireland and Scotland to the north, in the meeting of various seas, viz., the sea which encompasses Ireland at the north-west, and the sea which encompasses Scotland at the north-east, and the sea to the south between Ireland and Scotland. They whirl around like moulding compasses, each of them taking the place of the other, like the paddles... of a millwheel, until they are sucked into the depths so that the cauldron remains with its mouth wide open; and it would suck even the whole of Ireland into its yawning gullet. It vomits *iterum* {again & again} that draught up, so that its thunderous eructation and its bursting and its roaring are heard among the clouds, like the steam boiling of a caldron of fire.¹

This form of description was known in Irish as a Dindshenchas (pronounced dunnhanakus) tale. The word Dindshenchas was used to describe a collection of sayings or tales that serve as an explanation for the meaning of place-names. Tracing the history of Breccán is no easy task. Our earliest extant version of the legend of Breccán is also from Cormac's Glossary,

Now Breccán son of Main, son of Niall of the Nine Hostages, had fifty currachs trading between Ireland and Scotland, until they fell at one time into the caldron there, and there came from it not one, or, not even tidings of their destruction; and their fate was not known, until Lugaid, the Blind poet, came to Bangor, and his people went to the stand of Inver Béce, and found a bare small skull there, and they brought it to Lugaid, and asked him whose was the head; and he said to them: "Put the end of the poet's wand upon it". This was done, et dixit Lugaid the Poet: "The tempestuous water, the waters of [leg. or] the whirlpool destroyed Breccán. This is the head of Breccán's dog; and it is little of great", said he, "for Breccán was drowned with his people in that whirlpool".ⁱⁱ

This tradition is repeated in the Rennes Dindshenchas, although a second drowning tale is included. This second tale involves a character called Breccán son of Parthalón

from the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (The Book of the Takings of Ireland, a pseudo-historical account of the history of Ireland). The character Parthalón was the leader of the second mythic invasion of Ireland, yet there is no surviving version of the *Lebor Gabála* that lists Breccán as his son.ⁱⁱⁱ The reason for this secondary Breccán tale is unclear. It may be that the Parthalón account was written as an attempt to link the pseudo-history material with the Coire Breccáin tale or, as we shall see, it could be an explanation for the existence of more than one Coire Breccáin.

Elsewhere, we find a list of Early Irish tales in a document known as the Book of Leinster. In this list there is an entry for a tale called the *Loinges* (pronounced Loingesh) *Breccáin* (the ‘voyage’ or possibly ‘exile’ of Breccán). The tale itself is lost and the famous Irish scholar Professor Proinsais Mac Cana argued that the tale may have never existed and that the entry is an echo of certain tales found in the Dindshenchas material.^{iv}

The second detail mentioned in the Rennes Dindshenchas relates to an incident involving Columba witnessing the bones of Breccán rising to the surface of the *Coire Breccáin* whilst he was sailing in it,

‘It was there, too, a long time after, that Columb Cille chanced to be , when the sea rose up against him and upheaved this Breccán’s bones. And Columb Cille said “That is friendly, thou old Breccán” etc.’^v

Which brings us neatly to the other key figure in the tales of the Coire Breccáin, Saint Columba.

The whirlpool and the saint

One individual above all others appears to be most connected with the early Coire Breccáin legends, Saint Columba, founder of the monastery of Iona. Saint Columba, or Colum Cille (pronounced - kollum keelley) as he known in Irish, was one of the most significant figures in the formulation of the church in Scotland and Ireland. He was born in 521 and was a member of one of the more distinguished and powerful lineages in early Irish society, the Uí Néill. The tribal name was said to come from the descendants of the famous Irish king Niall Noígíallach or Niall of the Nine Hostages. Columba is believed to have travelled from Ireland to Iona in the year 563. He died on 9th June 597.



The earliest surviving written account we have of the Corryvreckan is found in the seventh-century Life of Columba written by Adomnán, which he compiled while serving as abbot of Iona before his death in 704. In Book one chapter five of the life he describes a monk named Colmán being ensnared by the whirlpool:

In like manner on another day, Saint Columba, while he was living in his mother church, suddenly exclaimed with a smile: ‘Colmán, Beogna’s son, has begun to sail over to us, and is now in great danger in the surging tides in the whirlpool of Brecán; and sitting in the prow he raises both hands to heaven, and blesses the troubled and very terrible sea. But the Lord terrifies him thus, not in order that the ship in which he sits may be overwhelmed by the waves in shipwreck, but rather to rouse him to more fervent prayer that with God’s favour he may reach us after passing through the danger.’^{vi}

The exact Latin phrase he uses is *carubdis Breccani*.^{vii} This tells us two important things. Firstly, that Adomnán understood the Coire Breccáin to be a whirlpool-like phenomenon by using the word Charybdis. This is the name of a phenomenon first encountered by Odysseus. Secondly, it demonstrates that at the time he was writing the life of Columba Adomnán was aware, to some degree, of the tales or tradition associated with the Coire Breccáin.

We next find mention of the whirlpool in the life of Colmán Elo. This is the same Colmán that Adomnán described in his story. The emphasis is very different in this version, perhaps to retain the dignity of the saint:

Once when St Colmán was sailing away into exile, it chanced that he and his companions came into Corryvreckan. At that point St Colman prayed and made the sign of the Cross, and in that hour St Columba in

Iona said: “Pray all of you that Colmán Elo be not drowned to the bottom of the sea.” For the sake of both saints, the brethren were saved and came to Iona, and on their arrival St Columba and his monks rejoiced.^{viii}

In this version of the tale the whirlpool is used to serve as a barrier to prevent Colmán from sailing into self-imposed exile on the Ocean. Colmán instead returns to Ireland to found a church, Lann Elo or Lynally in Co. Offaly. This was near to the monastery of Durrow, which was Columban monastery in Ireland.

This Life is preserved in a collection of Saints’ lives in a manuscript known in Latin as the Codex Salmanticensis. Although the manuscript is medieval in composition, experts in manuscript study have argued that the versions of certain lives within this manuscript that form a group, and this includes the Life of Colmán Elo, may be much earlier, have been argued to be preserved more or less unchanged from the 8th century, making them some of the earliest surviving versions of the lives of Irish Saints.

The next recording of the whirlpool in a saints’ life is in the two Latin lives of Ciarán of Clonmacnois. At its peak the institution at Clonmacnois was one of the greatest of the monastic churches of Ireland. Ciarán himself dates from around 510-20 for his birth and the foundation of Clonmacnois about thirty years later. The dates for the lives are uncertain although they probably derive from an early collection of miracles associated with the Saint.

In both versions of the tale Saint Columba is the central figure in the story. In these accounts Columba is returning from a visit to Ciaran’s monastery after delivering a hymn he composed following Ciarán’s death.

When Saint Columba was voyaging on the sea, there arose a storm in the sea, and the ship was thrust towards the whirlpool which is in the Scotie tongue called Cori Bracayn, in which there is a sea-whirlpool most dangerous, wherein if ships enter they come not out.^{ix}

But when Saint Columba was departing thence, he took away with him earth from the sacred grave of Saint Ciaranus, knowing in spirit how useful this would be against future perils of the sea. For in the part of the sea which bears towards the monastery of Í, there is a very great danger to those who cross, partly because of the vehemence of the currents, and partly because of the narrowness of the sea; so that ships are whirled round and driven in a circle, and thus are often sunk. For it is rightly compared to Scylla and Charybdis; I mean that by its grave and unmitigated dangerousness, evil is there the lot of sailors. When they were coming to this strait, they suddenly began to glide into it in their course; and when they looked for nothing but death, and because they were as though apt to be devoured by the horrible jaws of the abyss,...^x

There is one further account of the Saint and the whirlpool in the Sixteenth century Life of Saint Columba, written by Manus O' Donnell.^{xi} Although the text itself is late in composition it serves as a useful indicator of the material relating to the saint that was known at the time.

When Colum Cille was going to Scotland after the Convention of Drum Ceat, he came by chance to the Coire Brechain, which threw up the bones of Brecan, son of Maine, son of Niall of the Nine hostages, who had been drowned there a long time before. And, through the spirit of prophecy, Colum Cille recognised that these were the bones of Brecan, and he said: ' You are friendly to me , Old Brecan. And Colum Cille prayed then for Brecan so that he obtained the peace of Heaven for him.'^{xii}

This incident seems to combine the Rennes dindsenchas tradition with aspects of the Ciaran material. Reeves points out in his discussion of the term *carubdis Brecani* that the Latin version of the account by O'Donnell of Columba's return from Druim-Ceatt contains the phrase '*Illa sunt ossa brecani cognati nostri*' (the bones are of our relation Brecan). Conall Gulban, who was the progenitor of Columba was half brother of Maine. Brecan was, therefore, first cousin of Columba's grandfather.^{xiii} Both of these incidents show a relationship between the Coire Breccáin and aspects of death and burial. The first shows that the earth from Saint Ciarán's has the power to pacify the whirlpool. The second involves the salvation of a figure that had become associated with pre-Christian Ireland by associating him with Saint Columba.

The close proximity of the monastery at Iona to the Corryvreckan whirlpool makes it hardly surprising that the phenomenon became incorporated into the hagiographical material of the Saint. They would have known of its existence and many of them may have seen it first-hand. Furthermore, the Corryvreckan was just as dangerous for monks and travellers sailing by boat to Ireland as it is for the modern day sailor.

It is important to note that, in its current identification, the Corryvreckan is on a major line between Iona and Dunadd. The fort of Dunadd was a major site in the seventh-century. It could be accessed from the sea via the isthmus at Crinan and then transportation of goods could be undertaken either over land or up the river Add. The archaeological evidence clearly shows that Dunadd was a major industrial and commercial location, with substantial finds of E-ware pottery being located at the hill fort site, along with glass and a piece of orpiment – an imported yellow substance that was known to have been used in decorative manuscript work. Many theories have been suggested as to the organisation of commerce and the western sea-lanes, all of which stem from the notion of interaction through commerce.^{xiv} The precise role that Dunadd served in the political and economic structure of the region is unclear. Some writers believe that it was the seat of the king of the Dalriada, though without further evidence this is only speculation.

Two whirlpools?

The location of the Coire Breccáin is a matter of debate, for which Adomnán is responsible. In the title of the chapter concerning the whirlpool, Adomnán states that Colman was travelling to Iona from Ireland and that the incident occurred near the Island of *Rechru* (modern day Rathlin Island, Co. Antrim). This geographical indicator has lead commentators to believe that the event took place there and not in the body of water between Jura and Scarba.

We know that there was, and still is, a tidal race which forms between (either the Western end of the island or the region from Fair Head to Rue point - which is at the East end of the Island) and the Admiralty states;

‘The streams and eddies meet in an area centred about 1.5 miles south-westward of Rue point, on the northern side of the deep gully which runs through Rathlin sound; here the effect of the meeting streams, combined with the sudden change of depth, is such that violent and dangerous overfalls, known locally as Slough-na-more, are formed. These overfalls are violent during a short period only...after which, as the changes in streams continue, the overfalls become mere ripples and then cease’.^{xv}

As stated above the water between Fair-Head bay and Rathlin Island has the modern Irish name *Slog na mara* (Swallowing of the Sea).^{xvi} This is still today a very dangerous and impressive stretch of water though this does not prove for certain that it was the original site of the Coire Breccáin.^{xvii}

It is interesting to note that at the western end of Rathlin island there is a place called *Uamh Bhreacain* (cave of Breccain). This matches in name a location on the Isle of Jura. In the legend of Prince Breacan his body was buried in the cave, and this explains the name. In the Irish tradition, however, the body of Breccán the trader is never recovered for burial so the name of the cave is harder to explain.

William Reeves undertook the key work concerning the name *Rechru* in the 19th Century. In his study of the Ecclesiastical antiquities of Down, Connor and Dromore, Reeves argued that *Rechru* came from the name *Ricnea* used by Pliny and *Rikina*, as used by Ptolemy. The Irish annals of Tigernach have references at 634 and 739 to *Rehrain* and *Reclaindi* at 748, all of which Reeves believed to be references for modern day Rathlin Island. Adomnán believed that the location of the *Coire Breccáin* or *carubdis Brecani* was near to the island of *Rechru*.

There have been attempts at resolving the confusion concerning the location. Alan Orr Anderson, the most recent editor of the Life of Columba stated that Rathlin was regarding as part of the Hebrides although this opinion is unsupported elsewhere.^{xviii} Reeves states that the Scottish Chronicler John of Fordun, writing circa 1390, fixed the location of the Corryvreckan in Scotland.

We are left with three possible explanations for why we have it in more than one place. Firstly, that there were two separate phenomena both associated with the same name and that the name Coire Breccáin was used for more than one dangerous stretch of water. The Dindsenchas tales concerning the Coire Breccáin speak of two individuals named Breccán, but provide no more clues on the subject. Secondly, its location may have been subject to toponymic drift, the concept of a name migrating from its original location for whatsoever reason – be it changes in cognitive geographic projection or population movements. The third explanation is that there was a misunderstanding over certain details concerning the Coire Breccáin that stemmed from forgotten cultural knowledge or literary amnesia.

ⁱ Translation from O'Donovan & Stokes, *Cormac*, 41 – 42.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Into this came Parthalón's son Breccán, who went with pride and wilfulness from his father out of Ireland, and it drowned him with (his) fifty boats. It was there, also, that Breccán son of Maine, son of Niall (of the Nine Hostages) with fifty boats was drowned while on a trading venture, and nought of them escaped save the tidings of their destruction.' Whitley Stokes (ed. & trans.), 'The Rennes Dindsenchas. First Supplement', *Revue Celtique* Volume 16, (1895) 157-158.

^{iv} P. Mac Cana, *The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland*, (Dublin, 1980) 146-148. The spelling of *Loinges Breccain* varies in the tale lists. In the Book of Leinster it is *Longes Breccain* and in the Trinity College Manuscript it is *Loinges Bracain*.

^v Stokes, *Rennes*, 157-158.

^{vi} A.O. & M.O. Anderson (ed. & translated.), *Adomnán's Life of Columba*, Clarendon Press, (Oxford, 1991) p.28-29.

^{vii} *ibid* p.28.

^{viii} R. Sharpe, translation of § 13 from the Salmanticensis Life of St Colmán Elo in *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, Penguin Books, (Harmondsworth 1995) 266; n73. The original Latin is found in W.W. Heist (ed.), 'Vita S. Colmani Abbatis De Land Elo' in *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae: Ex Codice Olim Salmanticensi Nunc Bruxellensi*, Société Des Bollandistes, (Bruxelles, 1965) 213-214.

^{ix} R.A.S. Macalister (tr.), *The Latin and Irish Lives of Saint Ciaran*, Translations of Christian Literature, Series V: Lives of the Celtic Saints (London & New York, 1921) 42.

^x *Ibid* p.57.

^{xi} For a recent translation of this text see B. Lacey, *Manus O'Donnell: The Life of Colum Cille* (Dublin, 1998). There is also a dual language edition by A. O'Kelleher & G. Schoepperle (ed. & transl.), *Life of Columcille, compiled by Maghnas O'Domhnaill in 1532*, (Illinois, 1918; reprinted Dublin, 1994).

^{xii} B. Lacey, *The Life of Colum Cille*, p.191. O'Kelleher & Schoepperle, who also edited the text, argued that this entry was clearly written in a different hand in the manuscript and may be an addition to the original material.

^{xiii} William Reeves (ed.), *The Life of Columba, Founder of Hy; Written by Adamnan, Ninth Abbot of that Monastery*, Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society, (Dublin, 1857) p.263.

^{xiv} For a discussion of the archaeology of Dunadd, see Ewan Campbell & Alan Lane, 'Celtic and Germanic Interaction in Dalriada: the 7th-century Metalworking Site at Dunadd', in R. Michael Spearman & John Higgitt (eds.) *The Age of Migrating Ideas: Early Medieval Art in Northern Britain and Ireland*, (Edinburgh, 1993) p.52-63.

^{xv} Hydrographer of the Navy, *Irish Coast Pilot*, (London, 1968) p.453.

^{xvi} Edmund Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum: Locorum et Tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae*, (Dublin, 1910; repr. Dublin, 1993) 282-283.

^{xvii} The Admiralty Tidal Stream Atlas for the region shows the tidal rate to be in the region of 4 -4.5 knots at 3 hours before high water. The 'L' shape of the island also causes the water to be reversed on itself, thus increasing the danger. G.J. Marcus points out that in the early half of the nineteenth century, local coastguards used to receive extra pay for negotiating this dangerous tidal race. G.J. Marcus, *The Conquest of the North Atlantic*, (Woodbridge, 1990) p.180-181, n.30.

^{xviii} A.O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History A.D. 500 – 1286*, 2 vols, (Edinburgh, 1922, repr. with corrections Lincolnshire, 1990) Vol. 1, p.159-160.