Preliminary Sketches for the Reappearance of HyBrazil

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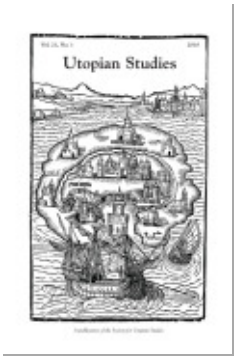

Utopian Studies, Volume 21, Number 1, 2010, pp. 5-15 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/utp.0.0003*

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The island of HyBrazil first appeared on sailing charts completed by cartographer Angelino Dulcert between 1325 and 1339. Based in Genoa, Dulcert asserted that HyBrazil could be found in the Atlantic Ocean, to the west of Ireland. The island continued to remain on maps and charts for several centuries, under various pseudonyms such as Insula de Berzil, Illa de brasil, Ui Breasail, or Brazil. It existed as a kind of terra incognita: within reach of sailors on the Atlantic, potentially visible from high cliffs on the west of Ireland.

Maps of the time acted as a disorderly mix of fact and fiction, compiled from personal observation, hearsay, and a variety of historical narratives. Without reliable longitudes and latitudes, cartographers strove to draw information from each and every resource. As a result of this confusion, the ocean continued to fill up with islands. If sailors could not find an island marked on their map, they simply assumed it was temporarily lost in the vast ocean space, rather than nonexistent. HyBrazil continued to appear, as in Paolo dal Pozzo Toscanelli's 1457 chart, which was used by Christopher Columbus on his 1492 voyage. Other islands such as Isola des Demonias, Frisland, Buss Island, Antillia, and the Islands of Saint Brendan frequently accompanied it. One might even speculate that the now obscure origins of the name HyBrazil might reflect modern-day Brazil, brought closer to Europe through the time's geographical fallacies.

In July 1480 Bristol merchant John Jay sponsored a ship to sail westward in search of the Isle of Brasil. The nine-week expedition did not find the island, and the ship was forced back to Bristol by storms. Several other attempts are reported. In 1496 an Italian merchant, Giovanni Caboto, arrived in Bristol. Known locally as John Cabot, he obtained a Royal Assent from Henry VII "to find, discover and investigate whatsoever islands, countries, regions and provinces which before this time were unknown." He sailed for HyBrazil but never returned; his five ships and three hundred men were almost all lost at sea. Some returned to England to tell the story, after first reaching Newfoundland. By 1498, Pedro de Ayala, the Spanish envoy to

*This material appeared previously in a 2009 exhibition as "A Preliminary Sketch for the Re-Appearance of HyBrazil," by Sean Lynch and Matt Packer (ISBN 978-0-9558630-3-5). *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2010

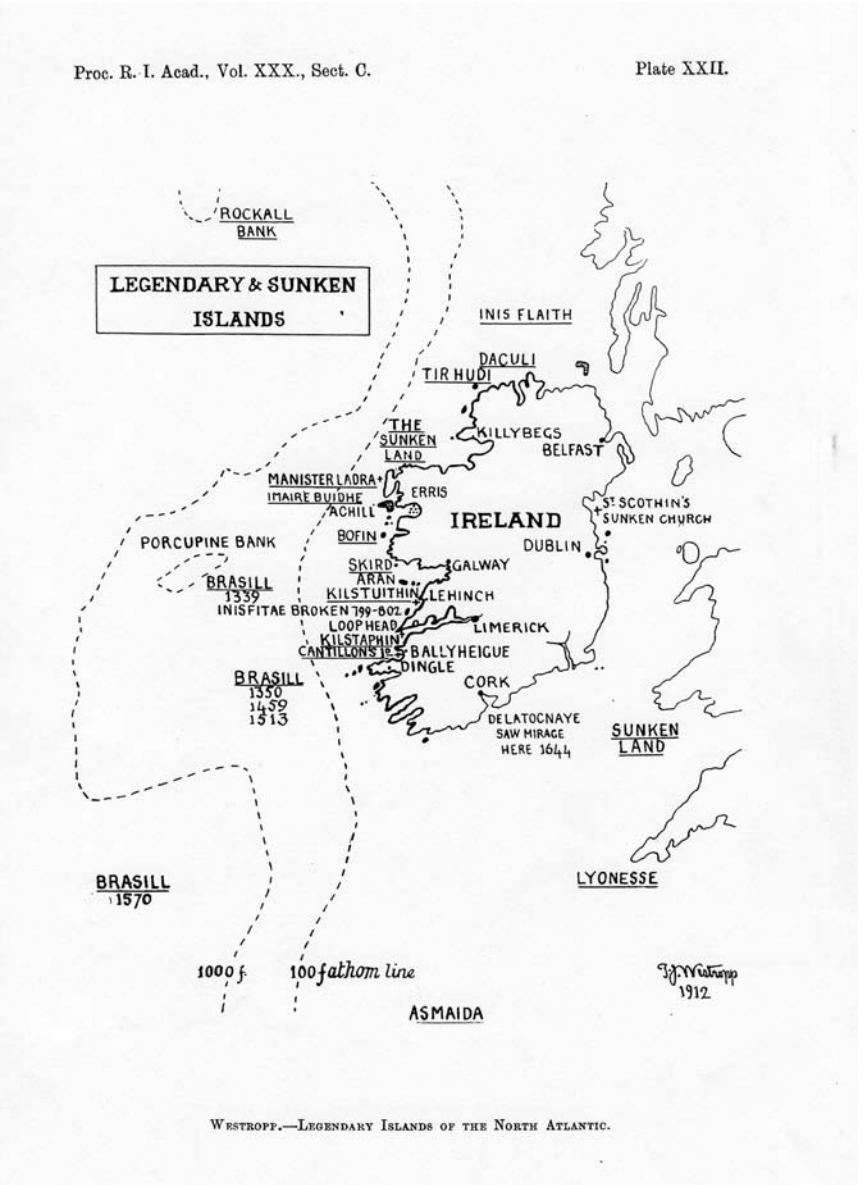

Figure 1. T. J. Westropp, drawing from the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. 30, sec. C (1912).

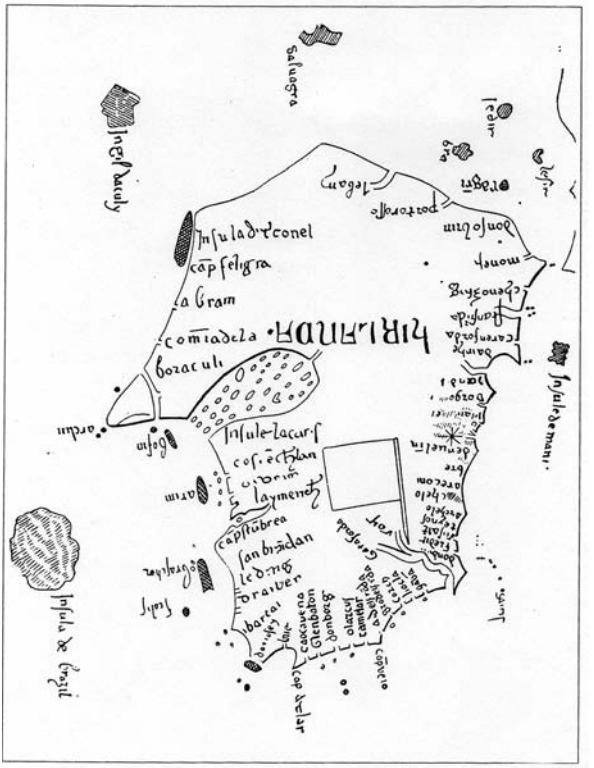

Figure 2. Ireland and Brazil on the chart of Angelino Ducart, 1339. Reproduced by T. J. Westropp, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, vol. 31, sec. C (1913), from the original in Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

London, reported that two to four ships a year were being sent from Bristol, all with the expressed intention of finding the island.

Despite the failure of these voyages, many encounters with HyBrazil occurred, most notably in 1674 with Captain John Nisbet of Killybegs, Co. Donegal. He and his crew were in waters west of Ireland, surrounded by fog. When it lifted, his ship appeared dangerously close to rocks. Nisbet and three crew then rowed ashore and found cattle, sheep, horses, and a large castle. They knocked on the castle door, but there was no answer. When night came the crew made their way to the beach and lit a fire. A "hideous noise" then arose, and they fled to the boat. They returned the next day to find a group of

old men on the shore, dressed in outdated clothes and talking "old fashioned speech." They claimed to have been locked up in the castle and that Nisbet's fire broke the spell of their imprisonment, causing the castle to collapse. The liberated men confirmed that the island was indeed "O Brazile" before being brought to Killybegs, where by virtue of their ancient clothes, money, and antiquated language, they persuaded many of their story. Upon the arrival of Nisbet's ship to Killybegs, a second ship set out under the command of Alexander Johnson. He too found the island and returned to confirm the tales of Nisbet and crew.

In August 1668 Morough Ley was kidnapped from Irrosainhagh, north of Galway Bay, and taken to HyBrazil by two strangers. He returned two days later with a medical journal that he was instructed not to open for the next seven years. However, Ley immediately started to use the journal in his work as a doctor. Known as the Book of the O'Lees, it is now found in the library of the Royal Irish Academy, on Dawson Street in Dublin. It contains translations of Latin texts, with curious tables specifying medical details, showing the names, stages, and cures of a variety of diseases.

As some parts of the ocean were thoroughly explored and accurately plotted throughout the centuries, HyBrazil continued to exist by being sought out, despite its geographical indeterminacy. Such a gap in knowledge only increased the island's imaginative resonance, especially along the west coast of Ireland and on the Aran Islands, located off Galway Bay. Roderick O'Flaherty, a seventeenth-century historian from Galway, noted, "The people of Aran, with characteristic enthusiasm, fancy, that at certain periods, they see Hy-Brasail, elevated far to the west in their watery horizon. This has been the universal tradition of the ancient Irish, who supposed that a great part of Ireland had been swallowed by the sea, and that the sunken part often rose and was seen hanging in the horizon: such was the popular notion." After paganism, Christian beliefs incorporated HyBrazil into part of a transcendental seascape, as the Land of Promise, the Isle of Truth, the Isle of Joy . . . Eden. It reportedly appeared through a blanket of fog every seven years, located "on the west side down from Aran, where goes the sun to its couch."

Gradually HyBrazil began to disappear from view, as the actualities of the Atlantic began to solidify. In *J. Purdy's General Chart of the Atlantic*

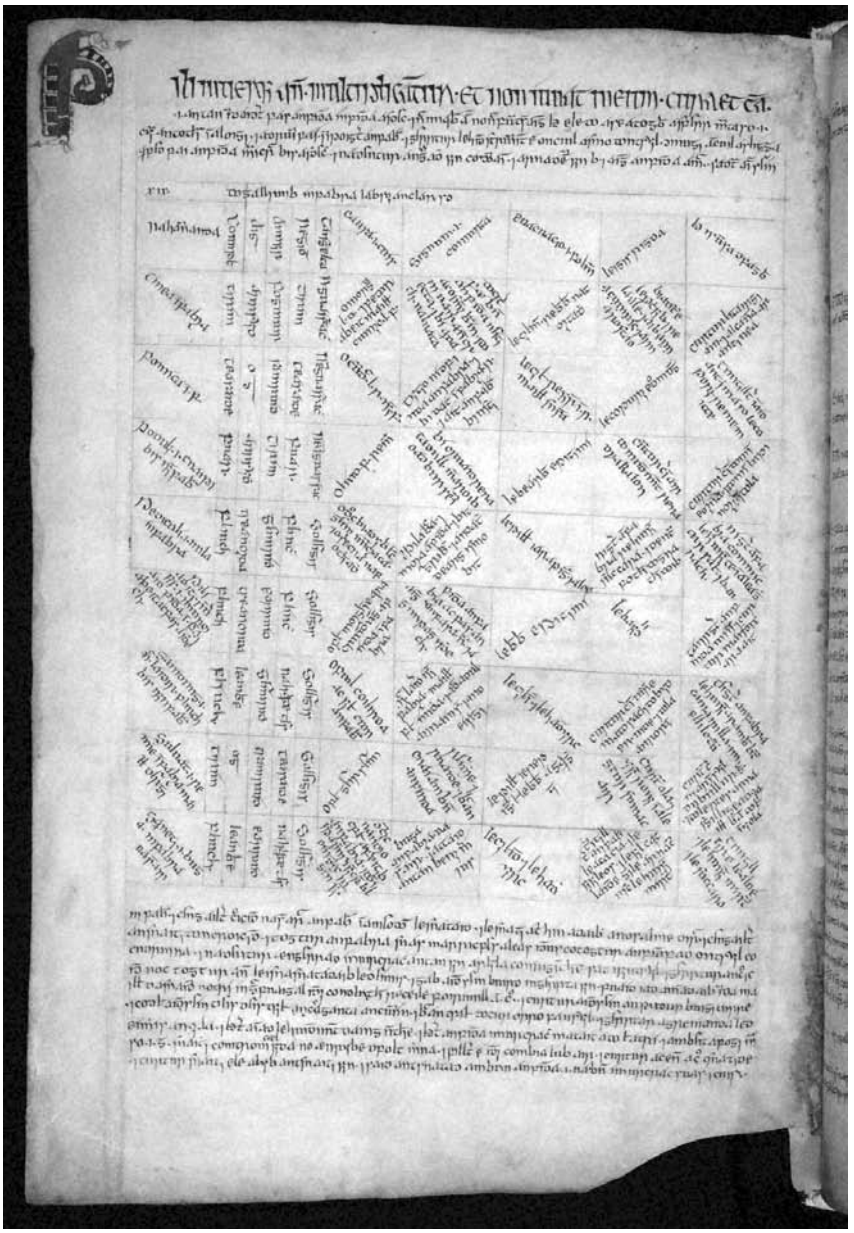

Figure 3. Book of the O'Lees, p. 40.

(1830), Brazil Rock is marked with no indication of doubt, at 51°10' north and 150°50' west. In a chart of nautical currents by A. G. Findlay, dated 1853, Brazil Rock appears again. But in the twelfth edition of *Purdy's Memoir Descriptive and Explanatory of the N. Atlantic Ocean* (1865), its existence is briefly discussed and rejected. As the idea of the nation-state and its dynamics of commercial capitalism grew, the existence of an irrational entity such as HyBrazil began to fade, dematerializing into the realm of folklore.

In more recent times, researchers and archaeologists have searched in the most likely locations west of Ireland. Shallow-water reefs have been found at Porcupine Bank, somewhat northwest of the most likely location of HyBrazil. Some also believe that the last remaining part of the legacy might be the island of Rockall in the Atlantic Ocean. This small island (twenty-seven meters wide, twenty-three meters high) comprises the summit of an extinct volcano and is currently the subject of an unresolved territorial dispute between Ireland, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Iceland. Continuing in the inquisitive spirit of cartographers such as Dulcert, islands have been discovered as recently as 1976, with satellite technology locating Landsat Island, twenty kilometers off the northeast coast of Labrador, Canada.

Thomas Johnson Westropp was born in County Limerick in 1860. From a very young age he displayed an intense interest in the antiquities of his locality and began making notes and sketches of ancient and early Christian monuments during trips throughout Limerick and Clare. He attended the University of Dublin, graduated as a civil engineer in 1885, and set about a job building and repairing bridges. By 1888 he had abandoned his professional work, having the financial means to pursue his true interests for the remainder of his life until 1922.

Westropp never became a professional archaeologist, having no concern to hold a post as an academic or an Inspector of Ancient Monuments. Instead he worked free of the demands of officialdom, combining his own fieldwork with scholarly research into historical material related to the sites he recorded. He completed over three hundred papers, illustrated with photographs, plans, and drawings, on the topography, antiquities, and folklore of sites mainly in the west of Ireland.

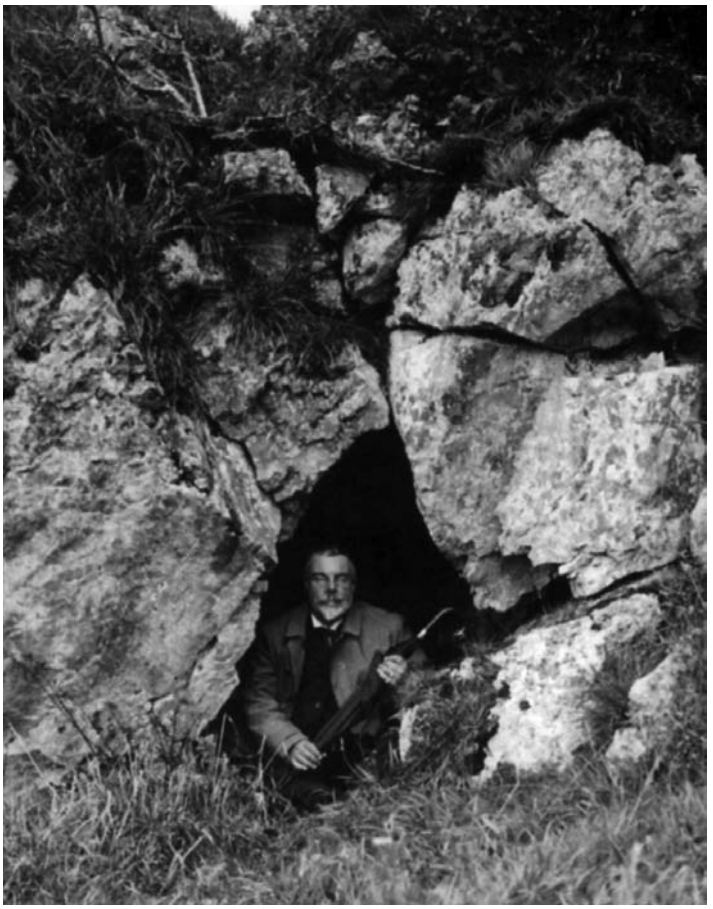

Figure 4. Thomas Johnson Westropp, at the entrance of Saint Colman's Cave in County Clare. Here, in the seventh century, Colman retired into the wilderness for the benefit of his devotion. He kept a rooster, a mouse, and a fly with him. The rooster, by his crowing, gave Colman notice to pray. The mouse prevented the saint from sleeping for more than five hours a day by scratching his ear if he dozed off. The fly attended on him when he was reading and had the sense to walk along the lines of the book. When the saint closed his eyes, the fly would stay upon the first letter of the next sentence.

In 1872, Westropp, aged twelve, stared out over the Atlantic Ocean and saw HyBrazil appear: "It was a clear evening, with a fine golden sunset, when, just as the sun went down[,] a dark island appeared far out to sea, but not on the horizon. It had two hills, one wooded; between these, on a low plain, rose towers and curls of smoke. My mother, brother, Ralph Hugh Westropp, and several friends saw it at the same time; one person cried that he could 'see New York'!"

Westropp recalled this moment in his 1912 paper "Brasil and the Legendary Islands of the North Atlantic: Their History and Fable. A Contribution to the 'Atlantis' Problem." His writing on legendary islands is knowledgeable, as he considers the folklore surrounding several other alleged landmasses off the Irish coast. It appears that his interest in the subject was spurred on by childhood memories, as he wrote, "I myself have seen the illusion some three times in my boyhood, and even made a rough coloured sketch after the last event, in the summer of 1872."

Today, Westropp's sketch of the encounter is not to be found in his sketchbooks that are now kept at the Royal Irish Academy. The closest documents located there are sketches he made at the cliffs of Kilkee when aged fifteen in 1875.

To speculate that youthful impressions of HyBrazil attracte Westropp to work along the western seaboard seems appropriate. As he studied the origins of ancient stone forts, he published twenty papers detailing research into two hundred sixty existing promontory forts, structures located beside a cliff face. Almost all of these appear along the western seaboard. Throughout these years of fieldwork, he could glance upon the Atlantic and its horizon at any time.

The most notable example of a promontory fort is Dun Aengus, which hangs over a 300-foot-high cliff on Inishmore, the largest of the Aran Islands. The fort's construction has two alternative origins. One notes that, about 3500 BC, Ireland began to populate as human migration reached the island. A group continued to push westward, to the edge of Galway, across to the Aran Islands, eventually finding what they perceived as the end of the world at the cliffs on Inishmore. The other follows ancient Irish myth, which says that the Fir Bolg were the rulers of Ireland, well before the arrival of the Tuatha Dé Danann, the Gaelic gods. As they traveled around Ireland, the Fir Bolg built and entrenched themselves in stone forts. Aengus, the Fir

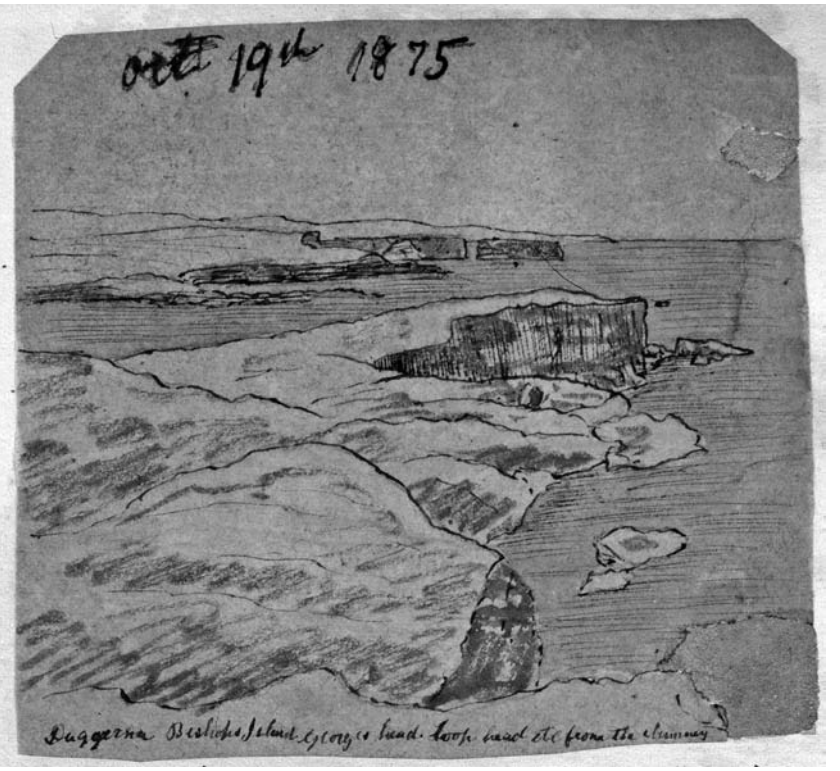

Figure 5. T. J. Westropp, *Sketches in Ireland, vol. 3: Tipperary, Clare, Limerick, Cork, Dublin, Wicklow, Meath, King's County, Westmeath, Longford, Louth, Roscommon, Galway, 1874–1894*, p. 330, detail.

Bolg chief, after attempting to settle at prehistoric sites such as Tara and Newgrange, continued to Connaught, where Queen Maeve promptly told him to continue westward, to Aran. Dun Aengus is thought of as his last place of residence. Working as an archaeologist Westropp naturally had an ideological friction with these mythical explanations. However, in 1893 he wrote that he accepted these accounts, but only with "natural hesitation and doubt."

In 1901, Westropp took a photograph of an unnamed female companion with a large box camera upon a tripod at Dun Aengus. Her camera is pointed away from land, facing southwest to the Atlantic Ocean, in the purported direction of HyBrazil.

Figure 6.

Figure 7.

After unsuccessful attempts in numerous archives in spring 2007 to find twelve-year-old Westropp's drawing of HyBrazil, an expedition was enacted to find a substitute for this lost artifact. After reaching Dun Aengus, a camera was placed in the location of Westropp's 1901 photograph, focusing on the horizon line of the Atlantic to the southwest of the cliffs. Each evening, as the sun set to the west, photographs were taken.

Figure 8.