

Saints, Snakes & Pirates

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Each year on March 17th, people in America and around the globe gather to celebrate Ireland. The Irish and their descendants dye rivers green, march in parades, and eat endless plates of cabbage and corned beef, all in the name of St. Patrick, the man credited with bringing Christianity to Ireland some 1,500 years ago. Despite the worldwide celebration of all things Irish, not much is known about St. Patrick. Still, what we do know is fascinating.

Although he is the patron saint of Ireland, Patrick wasn't born on the Emerald Isle. In fact, he was born in Britain, sometime around 390 A.D. His family was well-off, owning an estate and townhouse, and his father, Calpornius, was a deacon. As he would later write in a letter known as his *Confessio*, or confession, Patrick was not a religious boy, having little patience for the teachings of the local priests. That changed, however, at the age of sixteen, when Patrick had a terrible experience that would change his life forever.

Along with many of his countrymen, Patrick was taken prisoner by a gang of Irish pirates and sold into slavery across the Irish Sea. For six years, he served as a shepherd in a chilly, mountainous region in Northern Ireland. Life there was hard, and Patrick took refuge in religion, devoting himself to his faith as he never had before. *In one day I would pray up to one hundred times*, he wrote, *and at night perhaps the same*. He also learned to speak Irish—a skill that would serve him well later in life.

Eventually, Patrick was able to escape, along with some of his fellow prisoners. They sailed across the Irish Sea, making landfall in the British wilderness, where Patrick wandered for 28 days, eventually making it back to his parents' home. One night, he had a vision that seemed to come from the people of Ireland. They were saying, "We beg you, holy boy, to come and walk again among us." He continued having dreams like this, and he finally decided that their meaning was clear. He would return to Ireland and become a missionary.

Although Patrick is usually credited with introducing Ireland to Christianity, the Church already had some presence on the island. Christians had been worshipping in small communities in Ireland for some time, and the first Bishop was sent from Rome in 431. That Bishop was named Palladius, and although he probably preceded Patrick's missionary work in Ireland, many early historians attribute parts of St. Patrick's biography to Palladius.

While Palladius worked mainly in the south of Ireland, Patrick's work took him back to the North, near where he had served his time as a slave. Because of his fluency in the language, he was able to reach members of the Celtic community who could not understand other missionaries. And because of his time spent in Ireland, he understood the importance of ritual and spectacle to the nature-based druidic religion that had been practiced on Ireland for centuries.

Rather than tell the Irish that their ways were wrong, Patrick incorporated parts of their religion into Christianity. Legend has it that, because the Irish celebrated their gods with fire, Patrick added a bonfire to one Easter ritual. Because the Irish venerated the sun, Patrick added a sun to the cross—creating what is now known as the "Celtic cross." One legend tells us that Patrick explained the notion of the Holy Trinity—in which the Father, Son and Holy Ghost combine to form God—by showing how, the three leaves of a clover make up a single plant. Although that probably never happened, it is a good example of how Patrick might have used local customs to explain a foreign religion.

Patrick had great success converting the Irish, founding churches, and establishing monasteries and nunneries, but he also had his share of difficulties. British authorities frowned on his mission; the Irish nobility discouraged him from preaching to their subjects, and he was regularly beaten by robbers and thugs. The tone of his *Confessio* is defensive, suggesting that others in the church had accused him of financial wrongdoing, such as taking money in exchange for services that should have been performed for free. Unfortunately, we do not know much else about these charges, which Patrick vigorously denied.

According to tradition, Patrick died on March 17, 461, in a town called Downpatrick in Northern Ireland. He was acclaimed as a saint soon after, but it was centuries before his legend grew to the point that he was named the country's patron saint. It wasn't until 1762 that his feast day, which was only a minor religious holiday in Ireland, was celebrated with a parade by the Irish in the American colonies as a way to honor their heritage.

Because so little is known about him, most of the stories told about St. Patrick are myths and legends. The most famous is that he was responsible for driving the snakes out of Ireland. While it is certainly true that Ireland has no snakes, this is because of geography, not religion. There probably have never been snakes in Ireland, and the seas surrounding the island are so cold it would be improbable for any to migrate there.

Although the holiday of St. Patrick's Day has little to do with the man it supposedly celebrates, there is no doubt that the saint who was captured by pirates deserves a few words of praise.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What holiday do people celebrate on March 17th?

- A St. Patrick's Day
- B Ireland Day
- C St. Christopher's Day
- D Pirate Day

2. What does the author mainly describe in the passage?

- A how Patrick found religion while he was a slave
- B how Patrick became the patron saint of Ireland
- C the traditions in current St. Patrick's Day celebrations
- D the charges Patrick denied in his *Confessio*

3. The time Patrick spent in Ireland as a slave helped him with his later missionary work. What evidence from the passage best supports this conclusion?

- A "While Palladius worked mainly in the south of Ireland, Patrick's work took him back to the North, near where he had served his time as a slave."
- B "Rather than tell the Irish that their old ways were wrong, Patrick incorporated parts of their religion into Christianity."
- C "Although Patrick is usually credited with introducing Ireland to Christianity, the Church already had some presence on the island."
- D "Because of his fluency in the language, he was able to reach members of the Celtic community who could not understand other missionaries."

4. Read the following sentences: "Rather than tell the Irish that their ways were wrong, Patrick incorporated parts of their religion into Christianity. Legend has it that, because the Irish celebrated their gods with fire, Patrick added a bonfire to one Easter ritual. Because the Irish venerated the sun, Patrick added a sun to the cross—creating what is now known as the 'Celtic cross.'"

Based on this information, what can you conclude about Patrick's missionary work?

- A The changes that Patrick made to Christian practices to make the religion more familiar to the Irish have not been maintained in current practice.
- B The changes that Patrick made to Christian religious practice to adapt the religion to Irish culture were offensive to Christian priests and bishops.
- C Patrick did not mind making small changes to Christian religious practice to adapt the religion to a different culture.
- D Despite Patrick's efforts to adapt Christian religious practice to Irish culture, he was unable to convert many Irishmen to Christianity.

5. What is this passage mostly about?

- A why Ireland is called the Emerald Isle
- B the life and legend of St. Patrick
- C why there are no snakes in Ireland
- D how St. Patrick escaped from pirates

6. Read the following sentences: "Rather than tell the Irish that their ways were wrong, Patrick **incorporated** parts of their religion into Christianity. Legend has it that, because the Irish celebrated their gods with fire, Patrick added a bonfire to one Easter ritual. Because the Irish venerated the sun, Patrick added a sun to the cross—creating what is now known as the 'Celtic cross.'"

As used in this sentence, what does the word "**incorporated**" mean?

- A included something as part of something else
- B got rid of something in favor of something else
- C refused to change for someone else's benefit
- D gave permission to someone to do something

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

_____ St. Patrick is credited as the person who brought Christianity to Ireland, he was not religious as a boy.

- A As a result
- B While
- C Meanwhile
- D Particularly

8. When did Patrick become religious?

9. Give an example of how Patrick incorporated elements of the old Druidic religion into Christianity in Ireland.

10. Explain how Patrick's time spent in Ireland as a slave allowed him to become a successful missionary.
