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Although he is the Patron Saint of Ireland, St. Patrick is also a worldwide cultural phenomenon. March 17th, reportedly the day of his death (in an unknown year), is St. Patrick's Day. This image depicts a vintage card which celebrates the day.

Legends abound in the story of St. Patrick. Before we think about snakes and shamrocks, however, let's first examine how Patrick viewed himself. In his Letter to Coroticus (*Epistola ad Coroticum*), he says:

I, Patrick, a sinner, unlearned, resident in Ireland, declare myself to be a bishop. Most assuredly I believe that what I am I have received from God. And so I live among barbarians, a stranger and exile for the love of God. (Patrick - *Letter to Coroticus*, available for online viewing at *Readings in Church History*, edited by Jonathan Marshall, at [page 164](#).)

He also describes what he personally gave-up to work in Ireland:

I gave up my country and parents and my life to the point of death. If I be worthy, I live for my God to teach the heathen, even though some may despise me. (*Letter to Coroticus*, [first paragraph](#).)

Patrick converted, and baptized, thousands of people (including women) and formed many Irish churches. They were small and unassuming places, made mostly of wood but also of stone. The jambs, in these ancient structures, are distinctive for both windows and doors. They incline in a such a way that the bottom is wider than the top.

In addition to churches, Patrick set-up (or later inspired) monasteries across Ireland. These were not monasteries in the traditional sense; they were places (often in pastoral settings) where graduates (who could marry and have families) studied the Bible and then became preachers, like Patrick. While Europe was entering the Dark Ages, Irish scholars were working.

Continuing for about 700 years, the monasteries (and their scholars) contributed to the cultural survival of Europe, as noted by Thomas Cahill in *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. Cahill also makes an important point about Patrick: He was "the first human being in the history of the world to speak out unequivocally against slavery." (Cahill, paperback edition, page 114.)

Legend has it that Patrick rid Ireland of snakes, although scientists dispute the claim. Historians believe the story is allegorical (relating to Druids, not reptiles). And as for shamrocks, and whether Patrick used them to teach people about the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), no one is sure about that either.

One thing is true: Patrick was highly respected in his own lifetime. It is said that he died on the 17th of March (although we're not exactly sure in which year). A simple stone in Downpatrick, located in County Down, marks the site reputed to be his grave.

Things changed, dramatically, for Ireland in the twelfth century. Pope Adrian IV apparently issued a decree, to King Henry II of England, empowering him to conquer the Irish people.

It was 1155, and the Pope approved Henry's "desire to enter into the island of Ireland, in order to subject the people to the laws and to extirpate the vices that have there taken root." (It may be worth noting that Adrian IV was born Nicholas Breakspear - the only Englishman to ever wear the papal crown.)

Some scholars dispute whether the Pope actually sent this particular Papal Bull to the English king but, however it came about, sixteen years later an Irish-annexation process was underway - and political life in Ireland would be forever changed.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

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Media Stream



St. Patrick Baptizes Irish Women

Illustration from *European Hero Stories*, by Eva March Tappan. Published 1909, by Houghton Mifflin Company - Boston, New York, Chicago.

Image online, courtesy Heritage-History.

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Example of St. Patrick-Inspired Irish Church

Illustration and quoted passage from *A SMALLER SOCIAL HISTORY OF ANCIENT IRELAND* by P. W. Joyce. 1906

Book online, courtesy Library Ireland.

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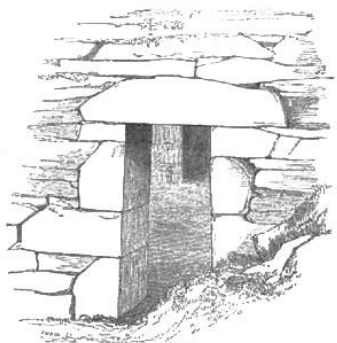


FIG. 44

Doorway of Tempull Cainhain in Aran, with sloped sides

Ancient Irish Church - Unusual Doors

Illustration and quoted passage from *A SMALLER SOCIAL HISTORY OF ANCIENT IRELAND* by P. W. Joyce. 1906

Book online, courtesy Library Ireland.

View this asset at:

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St. Kevin's Monastery - 6th-Century Ireland

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Glendalough, Ireland - Scene of 6th Century Monastery

Photo by Holly Hayes, online courtesy the sacred-destinations.com website.

View this asset at:

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Skellig Michael - 7th-Century Monastery, County Kerry

Quoted passage, from the UNESCO World Heritage web site on Skellig Michael.

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Skellig-Michael-7th-Century-Monastery-County-Kerry>



St. Patrick - Did He Banish Snakes from Ireland?

Image online, courtesy the U.S. Library of Congress.

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St. Patrick and Shamrocks

Image online, courtesy the mashemy.com website.

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St. Patrick - Reputed Grave Site

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Adrian IV - English-Born Pope

Cameo of Adrian IV, from Notre-Dame, Paris.

Photo of cameo online, courtesy PHGCOM.

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Henry II - King of England

Image online, courtesy the [plantagenets](http://www.plantagenets.com) website.

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FACTS vs LEGENDS

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