

MEDIEVAL IRELAND: ST. BRENDAN'S VOYAGE



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Description

Through the investigation of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story of St. Brendan and the legends surrounding the Irish saint. Students will then take a position as to whether they believe Brendan deserves credit for being the first European to discover America, some 1000 years before Christopher Columbus and 500 years before Leif Erikson.

Subjects

World History
European History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- St. Brendan Monument, Fenit
- Fenit Church, County Kerry
- St. Brendan Statue, Cahersiveen
- St. Brendan's Cathedral, Clonfert
- Sculpture of St. Brendan, Bantry
- Open Air Museum, County Clare

Essential Questions

- Who was St. Brendan? What do we know of him?
- What is the story behind the *Voyage of St. Brendan*?
- Is it possible that St. Brendan discovered America 500 years before the Vikings? Are there any other explanations for where St. Brendan may have sailed?

Academic Summary

From The Voyage of St. Brendan the Abbot (approx. 900 CE)

St Brendan soon after selected from his whole community fourteen monks. Taking these apart, the venerable father Brendan retired with them into an oratory where he thus addressed them: 'Dearly beloved fellow-soldiers of mine, I request your advice and assistance, for my heart and mind are firmly set upon one desire; if it be only God's holy will, I have in my heart resolved to go forth in quest of the Land of Promise of the Saints, about which Father Barinthus discoursed to us. What do you think? What is your advice?' But they, well knowing the purpose of their holy father, replied, as with one voice: 'Father-abbot, your will is our will also. Have we not forsaken our parents? Have we not slighted our family prospects? Have we not committed into your hands even our very bodies? We are, therefore, ready to go with you, whether unto life or unto death, provided only we find such to be the will of God.'

Having received the blessing of this Holy Father and all his monks, he proceeded to the remotest part of his own country, where his parents abode. However, he willed not to visit them, but went up to the summit of the mountain there, which extends far into the ocean, on which is 'St Brendan's Seat;' and there he fitted up a tent, near a narrow creek, where a boat could enter. Then St Brendan and his companions, using iron implements, prepared a light vessel, with wicker sides and ribs, such as is usually made in that country, and covered it with cow-hide, tanned in oak-bark, tarring the joints thereof, and put on board provisions for forty days, with butter enough to dress hides for covering the boat and all utensils needed for the use of the crew.

At the end of forty days, when all their provisions were spent, there appeared towards the north, an island very rocky and steep. When they drew near it, they saw its cliffs upright like a wall, and many streams of water rushing down into the sea from the summit of the island; but they could not discover a landing-place for the boat. Being sorely distressed with hunger and thirst, the brethren got some vessels in which to catch the water as it fell; but St Brendan cautioned them: 'Brothers! do not a foolish thing; while God wills not to show us a landing-place, you would take this without His permission; but after three days the Lord Jesus Christ will show His servants a secure harbor and resting-place, where you 'may refresh your wearied bodies.'

... One day they came within view of an island, not far off, towards which they sailed with a favorable wind. When the boat touched a landing-place, the man of God ordered all to disembark, he being the last to leave the boat. In making a circuit of the island, they saw great streams of water flowing from many fountains, full of all kinds of fish. St Brendan 'said to the brethren: 'Let us here perform the divine office, and sacrifice unto God the Lamb without spot, for this day is the festival of the Lord's Supper;' and they remained there until Easter Saturday.

In the island they found many flocks of sheep, all pure white, so numerous as to hide the face of the land. Then the saint directed the brethren to take from the flocks what was needful for the festival; and they caught one sheep, which, being tied by the horns, followed at their heels, as if it were tame; and he also told them to take one spotless lamb. When they had

obeyed those orders, they prepared to celebrate the office of the next day; and there came to them a man with a basket of hearth-cakes and other provisions, which he laid at the feet of the man of God, prostrating himself three times, and saying, with tears: 'Oh, precious pearl of God, how have I deserved this, that thou shouldst take food at this holy season from the labor of my hands.' St Brendan, then raising him up from the ground, said: 'My Son, our Lord Jesus Christ has provided for us a suitable place wherein to celebrate His holy resurrection.'

According to a 1500 year old Irish tradition, sometime between 512 CE and 530 CE, St. Brendan of Clonfert (County Galway) took 14 monks (some versions say 60 pilgrims) from his monastery and sailed west from Ireland into the unknown. After some time, he and his party found an island covered in vegetation and inhabited by pious Christian monks. In most versions of the story, "St. Brendan's Island" was a Christian idyllic paradise. After a series of adventures during which Brendan and his party were tested and rewarded by God, they returned to Ireland.

As it was with many ancient and medieval traditions, the stories of St. Brendan and his voyage were written down hundreds of years after they supposedly happened. The earliest surviving copy of the tale is from the 12th century CE, but that text refers to an older version from the 9th or 10th century CE. Most historians believe that the legend probably arose sometime between the 6th and 8th century as an oral tradition.

Little is known about Brendan's life. According to the stories, he was born in the area surrounding Tralee, County Kerry (multiple towns actually claim to be his birthplace) sometime around 484 CE. He was baptized and later became a priest in 512 CE. Instead of running a parish, Brendan spent the next twenty years traveling around Ireland and the lands of the region spreading the Gospel and founding monasteries. Sometime during this time, he and some monks sailed west on a seven year quest to reach the Island of Paradise. Finding the land already Christianized, Brendan eventually returned to Ireland, settled down into one of the monasteries that he had founded and lived out the rest of his life in quiet prayer and reverence. Today he is called one of the Apostles of Ireland (similar to St. Patrick).

The story of Brendan's voyage is one of the most enduring of European legends. References to "Brendan's Island" appeared on most maps of the Atlantic up through the 16th century, and a few maps even showed it into the 18th century. Many explorers crossing the Atlantic during the Age of Discovery believed they would happen upon the island on their way to the New World. After it was determined that the island couldn't be found, various theories arose questioning whether Brendan had actually reached the east coast of North America. That version of the story, falling in line with Irish nationalism, persists to this day.

The problem for historians is how to interpret the texts on Brendan's voyage. While they are filled with religious allegories and fantastic descriptions of mythical creatures and events, the pages also contain many facts that could point to actual events. The boat described in the passages is similar to those that have been found from the time period. The Irish of the 6th century were certainly a seafaring people capable of using those types of boats for journeys. After the collapse of the Roman system in Britain, Irish monks did travel to different parts of the North Atlantic to spread the Gospel. It is even probable that they reached Iceland before 800 CE, long before the Vikings arrived. Over the centuries, many different scientists, archaeologists and historians have speculated as to whether or not it was even possible for Brendan to have made a journey across the ocean to America.

In 1976, British historian and film maker Tim Severin hand-built a replica of Brendan's boat based on descriptions from the texts. He and his crew sailed the vessel, a

remarkable craft fashioned out of oak, leather and wool grease, 4500 miles from Ireland to Newfoundland, stopping at the Hebrides (off Scotland) and Iceland along the route. His voyage proved that it was at least possible for Brendan (or anyone else from the 6th century) to have made the journey using materials available at the time. Severin's boat is now a featured exhibit in Craggaunowen (County Clare). Regardless of Severin's successes, the world may never know whether Brendan actually reached America. What is important, however, is that the story of Brendan's voyage, combined with Viking legends and other stories of lands to the west, may have inspired Christopher Columbus and other European explorers of the 15th and 16th centuries. Through the investigation of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story of St. Brendan and the legends surrounding the Irish saint. Students will then take a position as to whether they believe Brendan deserves credit for being the first European to discover America, some 1000 years before Christopher Columbus and 500 years before Leif Erikson.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the stories and legends surrounding St. Brendan the Navigator of Ireland.
2. Students will take and be able to defend a position on whether they believe that Brendan deserves credit for being the first European to discover America, some 1000 years before Christopher Columbus and 500 years before Leif Erikson.

Procedures

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: How do stories and legends play a part in our national identity? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – St. Brendan and his Voyage (20 min)
- Video – St. Brendan's Voyage (15 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on St. Brendan and his Voyage, taking notes as appropriate. (20 min)
- Suggestion: All students should read the medieval source on St. Brendan and the Voyage
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: St. Brendan and his Voyage (15 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment / DBQ: Explain in detail the story St. Brendan and the legends surrounding the Irish saint. Students will then take a position as to whether they believe Brendan deserves credit for being the first European to discover America, some 1000 years before Christopher Columbus and 500 years before Leif Erikson.

Extension

On tour: Saint Brendan Monument, Fenit, Tralee, County Kerry, Ireland

While on tour in Ireland, students in the Tralee area of County Kerry can visit the Saint Brendan Monument, where they can see for themselves the large bronze statue erected in 2004 to honor the Irish saint. According to tradition, Fenit, a small fishing village of less than 500 people across the harbor from the much larger city of Tralee, is where St. Brendan was born in the 5th century. There is also a visitor's center on the site where students can learn more about the village's most famous resident.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- <http://markjberry.blogspot.com/StBrendan.pdf>
The Voyage of St. Brendan the Abbot (primary source – full text)
- www.irishcultureandcustoms.com/ASaints/BrendanNav.html
St Brendan the Navigator (website)
- <http://newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2013/05/16/did-st-brendan-reach-north-america-500-years-before-the-vikings/>
Did St. Brendan Reach North America – article by Andrew Howley of the National Geographic Society
- www.heritage.nf.ca/exploration/brendan.html
Irish Monks and the Voyage of St. Brendan (website) – from the Heritage Center of Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada
- www.saint-brendan.org/
Saint Brendan the Navigator (website) – from the official website for the St. Brendan Society in Ireland
- http://dl.dropbox.com/u/60232752/Brendan_In_Pictures_02.ppt
The Voyage of St. Brendan (PowerPoint)
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Hx1P_gKrqY
St. Brendan – The Navigator (video) – from the St. Brendan Visitor Centre in Fenit, this 3-minute video goes over the basics of the saint and his voyage.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wB2EsZhVtE>
Tim Severin’s “The Brendan Voyage” (video) – the full video, at about 1 hour, is probably too long for most in-class viewings, but it is well worth it. Even though it was produced in the late 1970s, the video does a great job of detailing Severin’s research and subsequent voyage.

Background Information

- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brendan>
Saint Brendan – Wikipedia article
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Brendan%27s_Island
St. Brendan’s Island – Wikipedia article
- www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/ireland/country_profile
On the Road: Country Profile of Ireland – from Passports Educational Travel

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/ireland/st-patrick
Early Christian Ireland – St. Patrick
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/ireland/irish-potato-famine
Great Potato Famine in Ireland 1845-1849
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/ireland/irish-rebellion-of-1798
Irish Rebellion of 1798
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/ireland/medieval-ireland-st-brendan-voyage-to-america

Medieval Ireland – Voyage of St. Brendan

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/ireland/easter-rising-of-1916
Modern Ireland (1916 - Present) – Easter Rising 1916
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/ireland/good-friday-agreement-of-1998
Modern Ireland (1916 – Present) – Good Friday Agreement 1998

Key Terms

- Christianity
- Irish National Identity
- Legend
- St. Brendan
- Voyage

