

A HISTORY OF IRELAND IN 100 OBJECTS, A SELECTION 5TH & 6TH CLASS LESSON PLAN

Salamander Pendant c.1588



Look closely at this object.

Have you ever seen an animal like this scampering around floors or appearing from under a stone here in Ireland? Unlikely. So, that tells us straight away that it probably wasn't made here. It's not a lizard, although it certainly looks like one.

It's a salamander, and the major difference between it and a lizard is that a lizard is a reptile, which is at home in hot, dry conditions, while a salamander is an amphibian, capable of living both on land and in water.

This salamander came originally from Spain but turned up in Antrim in 1588. It's a pendant, which is an object that hangs from a necklace or bracelet. No ordinary pendant, however, as it's made of gold and rubies. Spain was a great empire at that time, and the gold would have come from South America and the rubies from southern Asia.

A salamander is an actual animal but is also a mythical creature. Salamanders often nestled between the cool, moist logs stacked up outside houses. When these logs were brought inside to make a fire, they leapt for safety as soon as the flame was lit.

People noticed this and began to think that salamanders had magical powers, to survive and even put out flames. In reality, of course, those salamanders were just getting out of the way when they realized they were about to be cooked!

The person who wore this salamander was probably hoping that all that magic would bring him luck.

But it didn't.

He, and it would definitely have been a he, almost certainly died in a shipwreck. The name of the ship was the *Girona* and it was part of a huge fleet of 130, known as the Spanish Armada. This fleet was sent by Philip II, the king of Spain, to oust Queen Elizabeth from the throne of England and probably to appoint a Catholic ruler in her place.

However, the winds were against them and even though the English fleet was nowhere near as big, their ships were smaller, faster and easier to manoeuvre. The armada had no choice but to retreat, and the most obvious route home was around the northern and western coasts of Ireland.

These coasts are dangerous at the best of times. The Atlantic Ocean has lapped and nudged and raged and beaten against the land for millions of years, creating a landscape of rocks and cliffs, treacherous for ships straying too close to shore.

A storm rose up and at least 26 ships sank. There were over 1,000 on board the *Girona* when it hit rocks off the Antrim coast. Most of those who perished were ordinary soldiers and sailors, who could never have dreamt of owning a pendant like the salamander here.

We now think that there were some survivors. But, as it turned out, they were no safer on land than they were out at sea. Word went out from the government in England that all survivors were to be hunted down and killed.

This small pendant lost a number of its rubies in the chaos and mayhem that must have ensued when the storm broke. Yet somehow it survived, and was discovered among the debris at the wreck site some time later. Perhaps the Salamander pendant was genuinely an amphibian, well used to moving from sea to land. Maybe its magical abilities had nothing to do with fire and everything to do with wind, rocks and waves.