

## Saint Ia (Ives) of Cornwall Commemorated February 3/16

by Dmitry Lapa Source: OrthoChristian.com



*An icon of St. Ia of Cornwall (source - Irelandofmyheart.worldpress.com)*

This holy virgin is credited with bringing the light of Christ to parts of what is now Cornwall in the first half of the fifth century. Though her name is surrounded by legends, we will try to outline the major events of her life.

St. Ia (Hia, Ives) was an Irish princess and either the direct or indirect disciple of St. Patrick, the enlightener of Ireland. Her brothers Erth (Erc, Urith, Herygh; feast: October 31) and Euny are ranked among the saints as well. St. Erth may have been a bishop and close disciple of [St. Patrick](#) who held him in great esteem. When Ia was very young, she left for Cornwall to evangelize its inhabitants. According to certain traditions, seven other missionaries went on the same mission with her. Among St. Ia's companions were her brothers, Sts. Erth and Euny, along with two more saints whose names are known to us, namely Sts. Fingar (Gwinnear) and his sister Phiala (Piala; both feasted on December 14).

The young virgin had such a strong desire to labor in Cornwall for Christ that a leaf on which she sat down as on a raft suddenly grew larger and larger and drifted so fast through sea towards the shores of Cornwall that St. Ia was the first to moor to the coast of Cornwall, though she had been the last to set sail! Perhaps this event should be interpreted symbolically: the saint either brought medicinal herbs with her or travelled on a coracle, which might have looked like a gigantic leaf from a distance. The place where St. Ia stepped onto the Cornish soil was called Porthia and later grew up in the town of St. Ives—one of the nicest ports and seaside resorts in England.

Unfortunately, little information about the activities of St. Ia in Cornwall survives, but what is known is that she labored there for many years, succeeding in missionary endeavors and building at least several churches. Notably, most of the Christians in St. Ia's mission were martyred by a local pagan ruler soon after their arrival: They were thrown into a pit of reptiles.

St. Erth was especially venerated in the village of St. Erth, where his relics were kept and where the parish church bears his name; St. Euny is remembered in the settlements of Lelant, Redruth and Crowan. St. Gwinear is immortalized in the village of Gwinear, where the church is dedicated to him, he also had a chapel, a holy well and a Celtic cross at Roseworthy; his sister St. Phiala is a co-patron of the church in Phillack.

Among Ia's companions may have been St. Elwyn (according to another tradition, he was a companion of St. Breage) to whom the church in the town of Hayle is dedicated. Their martyrdom most probably took place near Penzance at the mouth of the River Hayle. However, St. Ia escaped the martyrdom and lived many years after that, gaining the favor of at least one local overlord named Dinan, who built a church at her request, and her missionary work was fruitful. It was recorded that the maiden of Christ built a cell for herself in Cornwall where she used to pray in solitude. Eventually the holy virgin herself fell victim to another ruthless tyrant and received the crown of martyrdom in about 450 at the bank of the River Hayle. It is presumed that the king in question was Tewdwr Mawr, notorious for his opposition to Christian missionaries, but in this case the date of St. Ia's martyrdom is some 100 years later. Whatever the truth, St. Ia is venerated as one of the evangelizers of Cornwall and the first recorded female martyr on British soil. St. Ia was buried and a church was soon built over her grave.



*The Church of Sts. Ia, Peter and Andrew in St. Ives, Cornwall*

The picturesque town of St. Ives in the west of Cornwall stands on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean and is named after our saint. It has a medieval granite parish church almost on the harbor dedicated to Sts. Ia, the Apostle Andrew and the Apostle Peter. Formerly the relics of St. Ia rested here, but no trace of her shrine survived the Reformation. The church is quite large and splendid and reckoned by many as one of the most beautiful churches in the county. The saint herself probably built the first structure on this spot; in the fifth century it was just

a clearing amid the woods. The construction of the current church began in 1410 and was finished twenty-four years later. However, it was not until the nineteenth century that it obtained the status of a parish church—it had been a chapel of ease [a chapel situated for the convenience of parishioners living a long way from the parish church] before then.



*Chancel of the Church of Sts. Ia, Peter and Andrew in St. Ives, Cornwall*

Inside the church is a modern statue of St. Ia standing on the reredos behind the high altar, next to the crucifix. Another church's interesting feature is its medieval series of wooden carved statues and painted figures of local Cornish saints along the ceiling of the chancel and the nave. In the Lady Chapel you can see a fine sculpture of Madonna and Christ Child by the local celebrity Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975), who worked in wood, stone, and bronze and is noted for her simple monumental works in landscape and architectural settings.

Among the church's other internal features of note let us mention the fifteenth-century painted and gilded angels on the wall plate of the sanctuary, carved figures of angels on the medieval font and cast-out demons on its pedestal, carved fifteenth-century bench ends, and carved panels on choir stalls. The church boasts four aisles, one of which, the Fishermen's Aisle, has plain windows so that fishermen could keep an eye on their boats even during services! The church's four-stage tower is one of the highest in Cornwall and rises over eighty feet tall. It often serves as a landmark for seamen. There is a tall and quite weathered late medieval cross in the churchyard containing a rare depiction of God the Father.



*Venton Ia holy well in St. Ives, Cornwall (source - Christopher Hilton from Geograph.org.uk)*

The town has an ancient holy well dedicated to St. Ia, and is called "Venton Ia Well". It is in a quiet paved area close to the local cemetery at the end of the town. Once it supplied this part of St. Ives with fresh water. Annual civic processions are organized to this holy well on the Sunday or Monday nearest to February 3 (the saint's feast according to the old calendar) led by the town mayor. The local Roman Catholic church is dedicated to the Sacred Heart and St. Ia. Apart from being a holy place, St. Ives is a popular tourist destination, as it is famous for its cultural life, with numerous arts events and festivals. It notably has a branch of the Tate Gallery and the Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden. There is the bay called St. Ives Bay (in honor of this saint) nearby. St. Ia is also the patroness of the village of Plouye in the department of Finistere in Brittany, France, perhaps indicating her or her companions' presence in the region.

There is another, though less known, holy site associated with St. Ia in Cornwall. In the wooded valley near the village of Troon, situated close to the town of Camborne, there are ruins of a pre-Norman chapel dedicated to St. Ia, complete with minor remains of a holy well and ruins of a pre-Norman cell. The chapel ruins stand on one slope of a stream, while the cell ruins are on the other slope. Tradition holds that St. Ia constructed a chapel, founded a holy well (which afterwards bore her name) and erected a cell on this spot. In art St. Ia is depicted in white garments, as an abbess, or with a crown and a leaf.