

ST. NINIAN AT WHITHORN¹

Bede, the Northumbrian historian, writing at Jarrow around 731, tells us of St. Ninian:

'a most reverend and holy man of British race who had been regularly instructed in the mysteries of the Christian faith in Rome. Ninian's own episcopal see, named after St. Martin and famous for its stately church, is now held by the English and it is here that his body and those of many saints lie at rest. The place belongs to the province of Bernicia and is commonly known as Candida Casa, the White House, which is because he built the church of stone, which is unusual among the Britons.'²

A list of the Anglo-Saxon bishops at this church in the 8th century survives and doubtless Bede obtained his details of Ninian from the first of these bishops, Pecthelm (whom Bede cites elsewhere as a source for his history). They are sparse details and, did they not come from an historian of the reputation of Bede, they would probably earn for Ninian a place in obscurity - along with many other early saints.

There are many accounts and other commemorations of Dark Age saints in Celtic Britain, Ireland and Scotland. Of the earliest Scottish saints our records are mostly of questionable reliability. With the single exception of St. Columba of Iona, the biographies of Dark Age Scottish saints are written hundreds of years after their subjects lived and the details in them are not generally reliable that far after the event. The 12th century Life of St. Ninian by Ailred is no exception. While it may draw upon earlier Celtic or Anglo-Saxon biographies,³ most of its detail can be explained as fanciful expansions of the facts provided by Bede. An 8th century verse Life of St. Ninian has similar problems. We are fortunate, then, that Bede has preserved some earlier facts. But we must not forget that even he writes some two or three centuries after the time of Ninian. My interest here is in finding usable information regarding the centuries before Bede and in the way in which new data, especially the outstanding recent archaeological discoveries at Whithorn in Wigtownshire (which is certainly the site of Candida Casa), might support

¹ This article was a lecture given to the Sydney Society of Scottish History on 10 March, 1988. I have been able to partially expand and revise it for publication. I also would like to acknowledge the hospitality of Peter Hill and all of the staff of Whithorn Trust during visits over the seasons 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991 and 1992. For further information and reports you are welcome to write to (and join) the Friends of the Whithorn Trust, Whithorn, Dumfries and Galloway, SCOTLAND, DG8.

² Bede, *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. L. Sherley Price, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1990, p. 148.

³ Though Thomas has argued that some details in the life can be tallied with genealogical evidence to suggest a possible date for Ninian. See his *Christianity in Roman Britain to 500 A. D.*

and add to his picture of St. Ninian and the importance of his church at Candida Casa.

Bede saw Ninian's major achievement as being his missionary work:⁴ carrying Christianity to the 'southern Picts' sometime prior to St. Columba's missions to the Pictish king at Inverness (the latter occurring around 580-90 A.D.). Who the 'southern Picts' were is not clear, although we would imagine that the Picts south of the Mounth, but north of the Forth-Clyde line, are what is indicated. Some circumstantial evidence for pre-Columban missionising before the middle of the 6th century might be found in the fact that St. Columba's missions only went to the north of Pictland (i.e. suggesting that there was no scope for missionising in an already Christianised south, allied with Whithorn)⁵ In St. Columba's day, the king of the Picts Bridei Mac Maelchon was pagan and the Class 1 symbol stones, which seem to be the territorial markers of his dynasty, do mostly exclude the lands south of the Mounth⁶. Was Brude only able to include in his kingdom the pagan portion of Pictland? But this is a dangerously circular argument and we should note that the casual spread of Christianity north from Roman Britain is another factor which could explain the Christianisation of southern Scotland by the fifth century A.D. Solid proof of Ninian's contribution is lacking.

All our details of St. Ninian come to us through the medium of the historians of Northumbria, an Anglo-Saxon kingdom of the east coast of Britain - in connection with their conquest of the south-west of Scotland. I will not try to fully answer here the question as to why the Northumbrians were so interested in St. Ninian, but it is a factor which massively colours our understanding of the historical and archaeological record of the preceding centuries. Excavations at Whithorn over the last decade have uncovered a very large Northumbrian monastery, on a new alignment to the earlier settlement, covering several hectares with buildings in a tight linear arrangement. The ideology of this re-alignment is suggestive of a new, strongly-planned, cultural order on the site. It is a political as well as a religious transformation. The settlement, a large Northumbrian monastery situated many miles from the nearest comparable site, is a grandiose embellishment to the cult of St. Ninian. The first bishop of Candida Casa, Pecthelm, was a significant figure in his time. St. Boniface wrote to him from Germany for advice on interpretation of the Scriptures⁷ - he was obviously not the type of person one finds in a 'backwoods' posting. I would suggest that we must seek to isolate our earlier details from the grand scheme of

⁴ Bede, *op. cit.*, 148.

⁵ On St. Columba's mission see Adomnan's *Life of St. Columba* ed. & trans A.O. & M.O. Anderson, (Edinburgh, 1961).

⁶ *Supra*, J.M. Wooding, 'The Enigma of the Picts'. See also Thomas in *Christianity in Early Britain*, ed. Barley and Hanson, (Leicester, 1968), 106-7; K. Hughes, *Early Christianity in Pictland*, (Jarow Lecture, 1970), p.10.

⁷ E. Emerton (ed.), *The Letters of St. Boniface*, XXIII.32, (N.Y., 1940), 61-2.

Northumbrian reconstruction of St. Ninian's church and legend.

I will consider here two questions upon which the new research may shed some light. Namely: when did St. Ninian live and what was the social and political context of his church? I will consider in particular the contribution of recent archaeological research in answering the second question. A general date is about the best we can hope to determine for St. Ninian. Ailred places him firmly in the late 4th century and would make him a contemporary and friend of St. Martin of Tours (d. 397). This is probably incorrect and a fanciful expansion of Bede's reference to Ninian's church being dedicated to St. Martin and of Bede's suggestion that Ninian was educated on the Continent (Bede's comments, I would suggest, actually mean no more than that Ninian was a follower of the Roman rite). The dedication to St. Martin would be only likely to indicate that the church was founded some decades posterior to Martin's death (i.e. after he had become a saint). The cult of St. Martin was popular in Dark Age Britain and Ninian need not have had direct contact with Martin for the Whithorn church to be dedicated to him.

According to Bede,⁸ Ninian's mission took place prior to Columba's mission of the late 6th century. We must assume a few decades gap at least for the chronological distinction to be worth making. I have likewise pointed out the need to put several decades between St. Martin's death and the dedication of the church. Sometime between 430 and 530 would be a reasonable position for Ninian's floruit. If, at the site of Ninian's church, we could find dating evidence for late-5th or 6th century settlement this would obviously go a long way towards verifying the existence of St. Ninian.

The general site of his church is easy enough to find. A town called Whithorn, in Wigtownshire, is the obvious candidate. The name is derived from Old English Hwit (white) and Aern (house) hence it is a direct translation of Candida Casa. The town has prominent remains of a 12th century abbey and some Dark Age inscribed stones. One, the 'Latinus' stone, may be as early as the 5th century⁹. This stone is impressively early, but all such evidence has its problems. The dating depends upon controversial questions of letter-forms and inscription formulae. The stone could also have been moved to Whithorn after the 5th century, to add to the setting of the later shrine at Whithorn.

A white church today serves the thousand-odd inhabitants of Whithorn. But is it no older than 1822 (the church authorities are obviously students of Bede!). It stands among the ruins of the medieval abbey, atop a hill to the north of the main street. Underneath these ruins, excavations by Raleigh Radford in the 1950's and by P.R. Ritchie in the 1960's, uncovered earlier buildings and associated Anglo-Saxon burials. These were probably parts of

⁸ Bede, *op. cit.*, 146.

⁹ W.G. Collingwood, 'The Early Crosses of Galloway', *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire Natural History and Antiquarian Society* 10 (1925), 205-6.

the monastery of (and the very graves of) Pecthelm and his successors¹⁰ This was the Whithorn which was known in the time of Bede. The area was, just as Bede states, only recently conquered by the Anglo-Saxons by the 720's. However it is one thing to prove the existence of a church, said to be founded by Ninian, in 8th century Whithorn - this does not prove that this was the Candida Casa of Ninian. It only proves that in the time of Bede people thought that Whithorn was Candida Casa. We would require earlier evidence than this. Nothing of earlier date than the Anglo-Saxon period was dug up, however, in any excavation of the 50's, 60's or 70's.

Early in the 1970's the Church of Scotland approved plans for development in a field opposite the main church, in Bruce Street. Medieval burials (of the period of the priory ruins) had been known in the field from cable laying in the 1940's and in 1972 and 1975 Christopher Tabraham made some trial-trenches, turning up more burials and some undatable walls.¹¹

In the 1980's the church moved again and a full trial excavation was conducted in advance of development. The persistence of the Scottish Development (in providing more than one trial excavation), on the strength of Whithorn's historical reputation, is to be praised. Peter Hill's five diamond-shaped trial-trenches, only metres from Tabraham's relatively barren excavations, yielded such a mass of early finds that the church felt compelled to postpone development indefinitely.

The finds from the trenches of Hill's excavation¹² revealed a sequence of occupation stretching from as far back as the 6th century A.D. In one trench a stone wall was dateable from coin evidence to the Anglo-Saxon period and is probably a perimeter terrace from the monastery of Pecthelm's successors. Subsequent seasons of excavation have uncovered the remains of buildings laid out on a plan very similar to that of the Venerable Bede's own monastery at Jarrow - perhaps this implies that Pecthelm modelled his monastery directly upon Jarrow. Outside of the terrace, house remains with wattle walls, metalwork (pins and buckles) and leather goods (shoes preserved in waterlogged soil) testified to the existence of a Viking community of comparable type to those uncovered in recent excavations at York and Dublin. No one had suspected that there would be a Viking community at Whithorn. Was this a settlement of traders subsidiary to the shrine of Ninian (a bit like the tourist shops in Whithorn today)? It seems to have flourished in the 11th and 12th centuries A.D. It was an interesting example of how archaeology can reveal facts unrecorded by documents.

The most arresting finds, however, were in layers beneath these. Finds

¹⁰ C.A.R. Radford, 'Excavations at Whithorn', *Ibid.* Vol. 34 (1955), 131-94.

¹¹ C. Tabraham, 'Excavations at Whithorn Priory 1972 and 1975', *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society* 54 (1979), 29-48.

¹² P. Hill, *Whithorn 2* (Interim Report), (Whithorn, 1988).

of 'E ware' pottery (course kitchenware from Gaul) of the 7th century A.D., of 'D ware' (grey bowls) and glass beakers with white line ('trail') decoration (also from Gaul), both of 6th/7th century date, attest wealthy settlement at Whithorn around the 7th century. From the very bottom of the trenches came sherds of 'Bi' (Mediterranean class 43), Bii (class 44) Bv (class 49) amphorae and African dishes, all imported in a voyage beginning in the Aegean region, which I would date to around 510-20 A.D. Here, then, is evidence of a community with wide trading connections as far back as the time of Ninian himself.

Large 'open area' trenches were opened around the trial trenches of 1984. One of these traces Viking and 7th century occupation sites to the very bottom of the south side of the hill while, just outside the churchyard, the Northumbrian sites have been opened up across the east-west width of the hill. The site is now (1992) potentially much bigger than first thought. Excavations in 1990 in the yard of the museum located more Northumbrian buildings, about 50 metres west of the main site. David Pollock's 1992 excavations north of the parish church opened up a site on the north side of the hill potentially as large as that excavated on the south.

In these trenches a scatter of small finds accompany a complex series of floor surfaces and post holes from wooden buildings. As with all such sites, persistence is required to disentangle the structural history. It is now clear that we have buildings, earlier than the Northumbrian monastery, along a succession of roads descending from the crown of the hill - on a line somewhat to the west of the present church. Timbers from some of these buildings, spectacularly preserved in the moist conditions, show tree-ring growth dateable to c.540 A.D. Other phases of building are dateable into the 7th century - one building having timbers felled around 680. Around the 7th century structures the small finds include both E ware and Merovingian glass, which we would expect in the 'Celtic' phase, and some early Northumbrian finds as well, seem to indicate little break in the continuity of the occupation of this site¹³.

How have these finds added to the historical picture?

Firstly they confirm Whithorn as the site of Candida Casa. As early as the 1940's W.D. Simpson¹⁴ had suggested that Ninian's church would not have been located at Whithorn but at the coastal town of Isle of Whithorn, three miles away. Here a fine natural harbour is flanked by a rocky island (now linked to the mainland) topped by an earthwork rampart of indeterminate date. A short distance away is a small stone chapel. Simpson argued that the chapel - which is obviously medieval - marked the site of Ninian's earlier church. He observed that Ailred describes Ninian's Whithorn as bounded by water on the

¹³ *Whithorn 2* (Supplement), 1989.

¹⁴ W.D. Simpson, *St. Ninian and Christian Origins in Scotland*, (Edinburgh, 1940), 75 esp.

east, west and south sides. This certainly fits the Isle of Whithorn though, on a larger scale, it also fits the entire Wigtown peninsula! Simpson also stressed the greater defensive potential of the Isle of Whithorn - which would be useful to a mission station in pagan territory.

The weakness of this argument is that Ninian was almost certainly not a missionary to the Whithorn region. A bishop is not usually sent into pagan territory, but is appointed to serve an already established Christian community. Whithorn was thus certain to have been Christian before the time of Ninian. That Whithorn was used as a base from which to launch missions further north is a separate matter. Simpson took for granted that Britain was mostly pagan in the time of Ninian. This can hardly have been the case. As early as 209 Tertullian was writing that Christianity, in his day, had penetrated even 'the British regions not reached by Rome'¹⁵ That the Wigtownshire region was thought worthy of having its own bishop in the 5th century would suggest that it was one such region on the periphery of the Roman world which received Christianity early on. Too many scholars have missed this point through assuming a monastic character for Ninian's church. This has again led to arguments in favour of the Isle of Whithorn site. It is, after all, exactly the type of peninsula/island favoured by the monks of the Irish church for their hermitages. Again, however, we should not forget that Bede clearly states Ninian to be a bishop, not a monk. Monastic communities were certainly at Whithorn within a century or so of Ninian's church, if not earlier. There is no evidence, however, to suggest that Ninian's own foundation was a monastery. Therefore arguments based either on the 'missionary bridgehead' model, or the 'monastery' model are entirely irrelevant.¹⁶ More recent studies have seen little obstacle to seeing the centre of Ninian's church located at Whithorn and its missions directed to the Picts farther north. Archaeology, however, does not yet have much to offer in confirming the missionary role of the church at Whithorn, but it can confirm the site of the early church as an established centre in the town of Whithorn as early as the sixth century.

Bede's story of Ninian may have been the product of Northumbrian myth-making in the 8th century and the pre-Northumbrian phases of the archaeology of Whithorn provide a possible new dimension in this debate. The 8th century verse life of St. Ninian makes clear that there was a major shrine here under Northumbrian control - as is suggested by Bede - and archaeology has confirmed this. But the Northumbrian interest clearly involves a complex and selective treatment of the site. Two of the early bishops at Whithorn Peothelm (Pecthelm) and Peotwine have the word 'Pict' in their name. In a period when Northumbria was making incursions into Pictish territory this appropriation of the seat of the 'first apostle of the Picts' was

¹⁵ Tertullian, 'Adversus Judaeos 7', in A.W. Haddan and W. Stubbs (ed.), *Councils and Ecclesiastical Documents Relating to Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 1, (Oxford, 1869), 1.

¹⁶ This is a legacy of the 'Celtic Church' concept - which assumed all British churches were originally monastically organised, like the Irish.

clearly a matter of more than spiritual significance - maybe enough for some rewriting of events. Was St. Ninian the only early saint at Whithorn? Bede states that the relics of others lay at the site, but these figures have largely been forgotten. The excavation of seventh-century and earlier graves suggest that up to three 'special' graves may form a focus of burial in the cemetery. At Lindisfarne in Northumbria there are dedications both to Aidan, the founding saint, and Cuthbert, the major cult figure on the site. At Maughold, in the Isle of Man, the monastic enclosure contains chapels to several saints. Clearly a similar plurality can be seen at Whithorn. Did the Northumbrians single out Ninian's story on account of its pre-eminent usefulness in their Pictish political aspirations? Archaeology reminds us that history is selective.

The most compelling recent evidence from the site is evidence of industrial activity involving materials such as lime, iron ore and other raw materials gathered from local areas such as the Solway - and worked at Whithorn. This evidence adds to the evidence of long-distance imports to emphasise the economic significance of Whithorn as an exchange centre¹⁷. I would suggest that the importance of Whithorn in the sixth and seventh centuries was as a centre of maritime exchange and industry. Slack water areas to the west of the Isle of Man divert northward traffic in the Irish Sea to encourage it to sail more to the east. The Isle of Whithorn is the closest port to Man in the Irish Sea and is also well-placed to service traffic west to Ulster and east to the Solway. Fishing conditions in Galloway and west of Man are amongst the best in British waters. When the Northumbrians pushed westward they rapidly took control of important coastal sites: Anglesey and Man by the 630s; Galloway around the late 600s. Coins such as the Anglo-Saxon sceattas found at Whithorn are evidence of a new maritime economic province in the mid-700s - at ports such as Luce, near Stranrear, and Meols in the Wirral (near Liverpool). Whithorn was no isolated outpost, but a pre-eminent economic centre which the Northumbrians were keen to command and expand.

The significance of Whithorn to the Northumbrians lay in its crucial economic role, which is linked to its pre-eminent central location in the north of the Irish Sea, and the usefulness of the legend of St. Ninian to their territorial ambitions. The archaeological work of the Whithorn Trust is allowing the details of the earlier story to be rescued from the obscurities of Dark Age Celtic history and for us to now view Candida Casa as an established site prior to the Northumbrian conquest. There is a great deal more to discover.

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¹⁷ See P. Hill, *Whithorn 3*, 1991, *Whithorn 4*, 1992.