

## Reflection on St Ninian of Whithorn, Choral Evensong, 8 October 2019

### Memorial Chapel, University of Glasgow

Thomas Owen Clancy

I give this reflection on St Ninian, one of Scotland's greatest saints, with some trepidation. Nearly twenty years ago I wrote an article questioning some aspects of how Ninian has been treated in historical work in the past, and making one particular radical claim, which has since then been frequently misrepresented as me saying that Ninian never existed.<sup>1</sup> That is not what I *did* say (and this is not the place to explore it), but as a result it is still with a sense of slight awkwardness that I am here speaking about this saint here in this holy place. Nonetheless it is a privilege.

St Ninian is often celebrated as the apostle of Scotland; and his monastery, and bishopric at Whithorn in South-West Scotland claimed as the earliest site of Christianity in Scotland.<sup>2</sup> Some of these claims may well be correct, and Whithorn is undoubtedly one of the earliest and most important sites in the development of Scotland's Christianity. For this reason if no other he should claim our attention in this series reflecting on 'Saints of these Lands'. He is also, of course, one of the patrons of the Episcopal Diocese in which we sit, the United Diocese of Glasgow and Galloway.

But I think that is not the main reason to celebrate the saint, especially at the outset of this year's series of evensongs and reflections.

To my mind, the main reason is that St Ninian incorporates all, or nearly all, the nations of Scotland in a way no other saint does.

Here, we need to recall that Scotland has a multilingual, multicultural past, and Ninian and his cult as a saint reflects this vividly.

Ninian was a Briton, that is, he was born into the nation of peoples who drew their inheritance from the Roman and pre-Roman past of Britain in the time he lived; he belonged to the speech-community that spoke a language like Welsh, the same people who at the time, perhaps the 6<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century, inhabited the area around Glasgow as well, the language that has given us so many of our place-names round about here, Glasgow, Govan, Lanark, Partick.

When the English of Northumbria took over Galloway in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, establishing a bishopric at Whithorn, as Bede tells us in his History,<sup>3</sup> they adopted and promoted Ninian as their emblematic patron, not disguising this British aspect of his background. They celebrated him as a missionary apostle to the Picts, the nation who lived north of the Forth at the time.

Gaels also held him in great honour--both the early Gaelic church in Ireland, where he was celebrated in martyrologies (*mo Ninn, núall cach gena*, "my Ninian, the cry of every mouth"<sup>4</sup>); and later, the Gaelic-speaking nobility who ruled in later medieval Galloway.

In the later middle ages he became a saint for the Scots-speaking community of southern Scotland, under the names St Ringan, St Runyan and St Trinian (yes, he is indeed the patron saint of St Trinian's<sup>5</sup>). Under this name he was known to Rabelais, who made his Scottish characters swear by St Tringean!<sup>6</sup>

And towards the end of the middle ages, he was patronised by Scottish kings, who promoted pilgrimage to his shrine. Through this process he became increasingly a national saint, and churches dedicated to him stretch as far as Shetland. From St Ninian's Chapel on Sandness in Shetland, to Killantringan near Portpatrick you can find places commemorating this saint.<sup>7</sup>

So, almost all the peoples and linguistic communities who make up Scotland's past, then, have a share of his cult, in a way few saints can equal.

In addition to all this, his legends built him into a saint with a European dimension. His reputation in the 8<sup>th</sup> century as a bishop who had trained in Rome;<sup>8</sup> and in the 12<sup>th</sup> century as a monastic founder who had drawn influence from the font of continental monasticism, St Martin of Tours,<sup>9</sup> gave Ninian a continental outlook, wide open to the European church community.

I want to mention two ways in which he became famous to the world, two miracle stories which cemented his fame, first in the early middle ages, and then in the later medieval period. This is partly to stress that for many of the people who gave us what we know about Ninian, what was important was less what he did in his life, his historicity, than his efficacy after death, the power and signs that could be seen through his miracles.

The first of these comes from an account in Latin of Ninian's miracles, written by a cleric of Whithorn in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> He tells of a local priest who, consecrating the bread at the altar under which lay the relics of St Ninian, suddenly prayed that he might be able to see the personhood of Jesus in the bread. He was granted a vision: the bread was transformed into a small baby.

*"He saw him sitting on the dish, the blessed boy  
whom old Simeon, filled with joy, had carried in his holy hands  
under the roof of the ancient temple, worshipping the infant child."*

He cuddled the baby, placed it back on the communion plate, then prayed again, and it was transformed back into the consecrated host, which he ate, and then “*belched out sacred praises*”, a carefully chosen and very bodily phrase.<sup>11</sup>

The story of this miracle was far-travelled, and was enlisted as proof of the real presence in the Eucharist in the first intense debates about this in 9<sup>th</sup> century Europe; and returned to feature in the definitive medieval debates on the subject during the central middle ages. This includes its incorporation in an Irish poem of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, stressing the doctrine of the real presence.<sup>12</sup>

The second miracle is quite different. It comes from a much later time, and is found in the Life of Ninian written in Scots in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> The miracle is a nearly contemporary one, and takes place against the backdrop of the Wars of Independence that pitted Scotland against England. Though this Life elsewhere tells of Ninian intervening to rescue a local Galloway lord from an English ambush, here we are told of his intervention to rescue an English prisoner being held in Galloway from execution—three times Ninian saves him from hanging.

As Tom Turpie says in his Edinburgh PhD thesis, in the miracles in this version of his Life: “Ninian could be perceived as a patriotic figure, protecting Scots from the invading English, as a local patron helping the Gallovidian captive, or as regionally powerful saint, receptive to all genuine supplicants” , including, we might say, those of other nationalities.<sup>14</sup>

It is from his fame as a saint who could rescue prisoners—from all political complexions-- that St Ninian got the symbols which identify him in late medieval and early modern iconography: chains. We see images of St Ninian in this guise internationally in images in the port-towns of northern Europe: Bruges, Roscoff, Copenhagen.<sup>15</sup>

And perhaps of all his attributes as a saint for Scotland, this is the one which we should embrace best in these troubled times. A saint who would intervene to rescue political prisoners, without partisanship or nationalistic bias. A saint for those imprisoned and seeking freedom. A saint for those needing rescued from danger.

I close with the words of the 8<sup>th</sup>-century poem on the Miracles of Bishop Ninian:

*“To all alike, races and peoples, the holy man gave teaching  
worthy of those who are called to enter a heavenly kingdom.  
And having performed such deeds among countless peoples and races,  
a man so good, with a teacher’s tongue, the joyful one  
was carried to the courts of the Lord, his voyage over,  
where now in sacred harmonies he sings Christ’s praise.”*<sup>16</sup>

*In Memoriam:*  
*John MacQueen. John Higgitt. Daphne Brooke.*

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<sup>1</sup> T.O. Clancy, 'The real St Ninian', *Innes Review* 52.1 (2001), 1-28; for a clarification with partial recantation, see T.O. Clancy, 'The Big Man, the Footsteps, and the Fissile Saint: paradigms and problems in studies of insular saints' cults', in S. Boardman and E. Williamson (eds), *The Cult of Saints and the Virgin Mary in Medieval Scotland* (Woodbridge, 2010), 1-20, at 5-9, esp. fn 21.

<sup>2</sup> Good overviews of Ninian can be found in Alan MacQuarrie, *The Saints of Scotland: Essays in Scottish Church History, AD 450–1093* (Edinburgh, 1997), 50-73; Alan MacQuarrie with Rachel Butter, *Legends of the Scottish Saints: Readings, Hymns and Prayers for the Commemorations of Scottish Saints in the Aberdeen Breviary* (Dublin, 2012), 402-4; John MacQueen, *St Nynia* (various editions, most recently Edinburgh, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, book iii, ch. 4; book v, ch.23; B. Congrave and R.A.B. Mynors (eds) *Bede's Ecclesiastical History* (Oxford, 1969), 222-3; 558-61.

<sup>4</sup> W. Stokes, *Félire Oengusso: The Martyrology of Oengus* (London, 1905), 194-5 (Sept. 16).

<sup>5</sup> 'The real St Trinian's', *The Scotsman* 27 June, 2007: <https://www.scotsman.com/news-2-15012/the-real-st-trinian-s-1-906661>

<sup>6</sup> E.g. in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, book 1, ch. 36; John Higgitt, 'From Bede to Rabelais—or how St Ninian got his Chain', in P. Binski and W. Noel (eds), *New Offerings, Ancient Treasures. Studies in Medieval Art for George Henderson* (Stroud, 2001), 187-209, at 195-7.

<sup>7</sup> For places incorporating his name in Scotland, see R. Butter, T.O. Clancy, G. Márkus and M. Barr, Commemorations of Saints in Scottish Place-Names: 'Ninian': <https://saintsplaces.gla.ac.uk/saint.php?id=530>

<sup>8</sup> Bede, HE, iii.4; for the relevance of this, see James E. Fraser, 'Northumbrian Whithorn and the making of St Ninian', *Innes Review* 53.1 (2002), 40-59.

<sup>9</sup> See Ailred of Rievaulx's Life of St Ninian, most easily in W. M. Metcalfe, *The Legends of Ss Ninian and Machor, from a unique MS. In the Scottish dialect of the fourteenth century* (Paisley, 1904), at 189-209, at 193-4, available on archive.org: <https://archive.org/details/cu31924013511369/page/n195> ; but also in a translation by Winifred MacQueen, in J. MacQueen, *St Nynia* (Edinburgh, 2005), 102-25. This detail, in which Ninian learns of St Martin's death just before he founds his church, is found only in this 12<sup>th</sup>-century Cistercian writer's version of Ninian's Life, but it is why so many people write of Whithorn being founded in 397, or equally, Ninian as being a fourth century saint. We don't know this: see Alan MacQuarrie, 'The Date of St Ninian's Mission: A Reappraisal', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 23 (1987), 1-25 for a compelling argument that his floruit might logically be 6<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>10</sup> See translation by Gilbert Márkus, 'The Miracles of St Nynia the Bishop', in T.O. Clancy (ed.) *The Triumph Tree: Scotland's Earliest Poetry, AD 550–1350* (Edinburgh 1998), 126-39; also by W. MacQueen, in MacQueen, *St Nynia*, 88-101.

<sup>11</sup> Márkus, 'Miracles', 136-8

<sup>12</sup> For brief discussion of the transmission, see T. O. Clancy, "'Celtic" or "Catholic"? Writing the history of Scottish Christianity, AD 664–1093', *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 32 (2002), 5-40, at 35.

<sup>13</sup> For which see Metcalfe, *Legends of Ss Ninian and Machor*, 40-83:

<https://archive.org/details/cu31924013511369/page/n43>

For an excellent recent discussion of the Scots Life in its context, see Eva von Contzen, *The Scottish Legendary: Towards a poetics of hagiographic narration* (Manchester, 2016), ch. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas JM Turpie, 'Scottish saints' cults and pilgrimage from the Black Death to the Reformation, c.1349–1560', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2011, p.96:

<https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1842/5983/Turpie2011.pdf%20?sequence=2>

<sup>15</sup> See Higgitt, 'From Bede to Rabelais'; and J. Higgitt, 'Imageis Maid with Mennis Hand': *Saints Images, Belief and Identity in Later Medieval Scotland*, The Ninth Whithorn Lecture, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2000 (Whithorn, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Márkus, 'Miracles', 139.