

Richard III and St Ninian

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Thomas Turpie, one of the leading Scottish historians of the early Scottish saints, describes Richard, duke of Gloucester, as ‘the most high profile patron’ of the cult of St Ninian in the fifteenth century¹. Who was St Ninian² and why did Richard III choose him as his patron saint? This article explores these questions and also includes information about a new collaboration between the Whithorn Trust, in Galloway Scotland, and the Scottish Branch of the Richard III Society.

St Ninian and Whithorn

The earliest written records about St Ninian were produced in the eighth century. They included a long poem, probably written at Whithorn, called *Miracula Nyniae Episcopi*³, which tells the stories of the miracles performed by the saint, and the account by the Venerable Bede of Bishop Nynia, who had built a famous church at Whithorn and was renowned for his holy life and healing miracles⁴. Both are believed to be based on an earlier lost ‘Life’ of St Ninian written at Whithorn.

Tradition says that St Ninian originally came from south-west Scotland and went to Rome, where he was made a bishop. He arrived in Galloway in the late fourth century and established *Candida Casa* – the ‘shining white shack’ – from which the name Whithorn is derived. The exact location of *Candida Casa* is not known⁵. Archaeological excavations have uncovered evidence of an early Christian Church at Whithorn, as well as a substantial Christian secular community. By tradition, Bishop Ninian went out to preach to the Picts, who lived in the area south of the Antonine Wall between the Firth of Clyde and the Firth of Forth. Brooke⁶ suggests that this was an action that was not only in keeping with their mission to convert the Picts to Christianity but also a political necessity to stop the incursions. Tradition says that St Ninian died in 431 AD and was buried in his church in Galloway. After Ninian’s death, monks from Whithorn continued to spread the message north-eastwards through Scotland.

There has always been doubt about the origin of St Ninian. However, there is no doubt that an early monastic settlement was established at Whithorn and that it was connected to St Ninian. Some historians believe that he is actually the Irish St Finian of Movilla in Northern Ireland, who lived over 100 years after Ninian’s death. Tradition says that Finian was educated at the school at Whithorn and returned to build the monastery at Movilla, which is where St Columba was educated. Edmonds’ work on the Irish hagiography shows that there were connections between Whithorn and Movilla during the Age of Saints (fifth to the seventh centuries).

By the seventh century the shrine of St Ninian was probably situated in a church at Whithorn. A monastery had been established that had become an important centre of learning, with a library and

¹ Turpie (2016).

² The spelling ‘Ninian’ is used throughout this article. The original spelling was probably the Brittonic ‘To-Niniau’. The early Christian Church used the name ‘Niniau’. In the tenth century, a language shift took place, which changed Niniau to the Latinised ‘Ninianus’. ‘Nynia’ was another early Latinised version used by Bede.

³ Winifred MacQueen’s translation of the text is available on the Dumfries and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society website.

⁴ Edmonds, F., *Whithorn’s renown in the early medieval period: Whithorn, Futerna and Magnum Monasterium*, The Whithorn Trust, 2009.

⁵ Kirkmadrine, where very early standing stones are sited, has been suggested as the original site of *Candida Casa*. Wherever the original site was, Whithorn soon became the major site and St Ninian was buried there.

⁶ Brooke (1989).

scriptorium. In the eighth century the church and shrine of St Ninian came under the control of the kingdom of Northumbria. The story of St Ninian spread throughout Northumbria and the cult of St Ninian began. During this time the site developed to include a church, monastery and buildings to house pilgrims, and from this time pilgrims travelled to Whithorn to seek healing and pray at the shrine. In the twelfth century, Whithorn came under the rule of the king of Scotland and about 1175 canons of the Premonstratensian order came to Whithorn from the Abbey of Prémontré in France. They built the great cross-shaped cathedral, which unusually served as both the priory church and the diocesan cathedral, and cloisters on the site of the earlier church. St Ninian's shrine was re-sited in the crypt of the cathedral and a new age of pilgrimage began. In 1560, this time came to an end when the Scottish Reformation began. Like all churches and shrines in Scotland, St Ninian's shrine was destroyed, the cathedral stripped of its wealth and lands and by 1600 the church lay in ruins.

Archaeological excavations began in the 1880s and continued in the twentieth century and have produced much information about Whithorn's past. The Whithorn Trust was established in 1986 to interpret the archaeology and history of Whithorn through the exhibition centre 'The Whithorn Story'. The Trust also looks after the ancient site for Historic Scotland.

Richard III and the cult of St Ninian

Whatever doubt is cast on St Ninian himself, there is no doubt that in the late fifteenth century, pilgrims travelled to his shrine at Whithorn and that Richard III chose him as his patron saint. There

The pilgrims' landing place, Whithorn.

Photo courtesy of Norma Benathan



are several theories as to where Richard learned about St Ninian. Hughes and Harrap believe that he did so when Warden of the Western Marches, and geographically that appears to make sense. Harrap also points out that Carlisle, where Richard would have stayed at times, was a natural stopping-off point for pilgrims going to Whithorn. Turpie believes that Richard learned about St Ninian in north-east England, because Cumbria was evangelised not by St Ninian but by St Mungo of Strathclyde and because during the fifteenth century the cult of St Ninian flourished in north-east England, not in the north-west, the main centres being Ripon and York⁷. Richard spent much of

his time in the Ripon area, where his home at Middleham was situated. It is more likely that Turpie is correct.

⁷ Turpie (2016).

Whithorn Cathedral

Photo courtesy of Norma Benathan



Grant is among historians who have concluded that Richard's choice of St Ninian as his patron saint was for political reasons. He says that Richard was a true Border Lord, acquisitive for power and land. The main evidence he gives for this is Richard's intention to establish a palatinate in south-west Scotland. This would carry considerable weight if St Ninian had influence in the proposed area of the palatinate. In June 1482 the treaty of Fotheringhay was agreed between Edward IV and Alexander, duke of Albany, prior to the invasion of Scotland in July and August. In return for Edward's assistance in making him king of Scots, Albany agreed to cede four Scottish lordships in the south-west March. They follow the rivers running from north to south in the eastern part of Dumfriesshire to the western edge of what is now Scottish Borders – from West to East Annandale, Eskdale and Ewesdale, Wauchopdale and Liddesdale. In January 1483 Edward IV authorised Richard, duke of Gloucester, to conquer for himself these lands in south-west Scotland to form the palatinate. The same four lordships were included together with Clydesdale (in the area north of Dumfriesshire as far as Glasgow) and the Western March. Grant describes this as 'the climax of a dozen years of aggrandisement'⁸ by Richard in the north and sees this as an agenda where Richard's actions were all focused on one aim – to occupy and rule south-west Scotland, which he describes as 'the region of St Ninian'⁹. Grant's connection of St Ninian to the proposed palatinate is dubious. The lands mentioned in the agreement were in the east of south-west Scotland, not 100 miles away in the far west where St Ninian's shrine was.

Harrap¹⁰ takes a different line from Grant. He comments that Richard's 'notoriety remains the context in which historians hoping to comment on Richard's personality often work' but that there are documents that point to a different interpretation of Richard's character and among these are references to St Ninian. Harrap believes that Richard's choice of St Ninian cannot be explained solely by political gain. He says that Richard was not born a northerner but became one and believes that Richard's devotion to St Ninian was part of his enculturation. When considering whether Richard's choice of St Ninian as his patron saint was political, Harrap returns time and again to the inclusion of

⁸ Grant (1996), p.125.

⁹ Grant (1996), p.125.

¹⁰ Harrap (2014)

St Ninian's Collect in The Hours of Richard III. If it was political rather than devotional, then why is the Collect there?

We should also consider the new medical knowledge of Richard's scoliosis as a possible reason for his choice of St Ninian as his patron saint. St Ninian had a reputation as a healer and this may have been why Richard chose him. His scoliosis was the most likely reason, and his and Anne's difficulty in having children may have been another. It is this that makes it probable that Richard visited the shrine of St Ninian at Whithorn to pray for healing. In his position as Warden of the Western Marches towards Scotland, he was geographically close to Galloway, travelling to the Isle of Whithorn by boat from Maryport in Cumbria.

Looking at evidence from Richard's life, there are strands that can be linked to the teaching of St Ninian. As well as his reputation as a healer, St Ninian was known as a humble man caring for his people and as an educator. Francis Bacon, commenting on the Parliament of 1484 that passed laws that changed the legal system to benefit and protect ordinary people, said that Richard was 'a good lawmaker for the ease and solace of the common people'¹¹. Richard's record in the north of England was one of firmly but fairly applying justice and being a lord to whom people could appeal when they had been wronged. One of the laws in that Parliament concerned restrictions on the import of goods from Europe. Books were specifically exempted from this law to protect learning and education.

Richard III's spiritual life was in the main not unusual for a medieval prince. He followed the practices of the day – praying daily, attending mass, and doing penance. He founded chantries and did charitable works. All these things were expected of men in Richard's position. When we look at the detail of his charitable work we can see the direct influence of St Ninian. There were four instances where St Ninian's name was included in the dedication. The first was at Queens' College, Cambridge, in 1477, where he funded four scholarships. The next two were at Middleham and Barnard Castle in 1478 and the final and best known in York when he was king. The dedication read:

To be in the Church of York the king has ordained 100 priests and to sing there in the worship of God, Our Lady, Saint George, and Saint Ninian *ut patet in billa*¹²

St Ninian, a somewhat obscure Scottish saint, is linked with the Virgin Mary and the patron saint of England. The inclusion of St Ninian in the dedication at York is an indication that he was Richard III's most personal patron saint. The altars were built and the chantry was in operation by early 1485. When the news of his death reached York, the priests at the altar of St Ninian would have immediately begun prayers for Richard and those killed at Bosworth. Richard gave many charitable donations and appears to have had particular concern for poorer people in the north of England. There are examples of him providing money to ensure that priests of small rural parishes were educated so that they could educate the people. This is a small, insignificant fact but it may indicate a humbleness that gets overlooked because of the notorious historical context that surrounds Richard III as proposed by Harrap.

¹¹ Sutton, A. F., *Richard's Parliament*, www.richardiii.net.

¹² British Library Harley MS 433 f. 72, in British Library Harleian Manuscript MSS 433, Vol. I, p. 201.

Finally, I return to St Ninian's Collect in the *Book of Hours* of Richard III. The Collect is at the very beginning of the book, where he would see it when he opened the book. It shows that St Ninian was not a political choice but a personal one. Richard's choice of a humble Scottish saint, whose teaching can be linked both directly and indirectly to Richard's conduct, leads to a different picture of him that does not fit with the usual portrayal in history books.

The Richard III and St Ninian Project

Until this year, Richard III's connection to St Ninian has not been represented at The Whithorn Story. This gap has now been filled and on 27 August 2016 a new interpretation board called 'Richard III and St Ninian' was added to the exhibition during the visit of the Scottish Branch. It provides another chapter in the long history of Whithorn. The following account of the visit to Whithorn is interspersed with memories of the day from our members.

It began with a phone call when I telephoned the Whithorn Experience in June to make arrangements for a visit by members of the Scottish Branch. A puzzled voice said 'Why do the Richard III Society want to come to Whithorn?' My answer led to a meeting at Whithorn with Julia Muir Watt, the manager of the site, and priests from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Galloway. Over the summer Julia and I worked to produce the new interpretation board in time for the Scottish Branch members' visit and arrange a brief ceremony where St Ninian's Collect would be read.

Looking back, the arrangements made were totally unrealistic. I asked members to travel by car for hundreds of miles and arrive at 12 noon. Whithorn is the most remote Ricardian site in the United Kingdom but everyone arrived on time and within 15 minutes of each other. We met at the Isle of Whithorn and had a splendid buffet lunch at the Steam Packet Inn overlooking the harbour. In glorious sunshine, with the hills of Cumbria visible across the water, we made the short walk to see where the pilgrims landed, and followed in their footsteps to the twelfth-century St Ninian's Chapel, where pilgrims gave thanks for their safe arrival. 'I will take away the memory of looking through the window at St. Ninian's Chapel and visualising Richard arriving by boat to visit the shrine. It was wonderful to think he may have looked out at same view and I was standing where he stood. Gave me goosebumps.' (Senga Young)

We then drove the pilgrim route to the Royal Burgh of Whithorn, where we were greeted by the Trustees of the Whithorn Trust and Julia and her staff. The new banner, donated by the Scottish Branch, was prominently displayed in the entrance. We went through to the exhibition centre, where Revd Alex Currie, the chairman of the Board of Trustees, welcomed everyone and asked Philippa Langley, the president of the Scottish Branch, to unveil the interpretation board. Philippa spoke movingly of Richard III's connection to St Ninian before removing the cover from the board. We then had time to look round the exhibition before gathering at 3 p.m. to walk up to the crypt where the shrine of St Ninian used to be. Led by Father MacFadden, the acting head of the diocese of Galloway, we entered the candlelit crypt to the music of the Richard III Requiem composed by the Dumfriesshire composer Geoffrey Davidson. The crypt itself is an ancient place that evokes times long gone by and never more so than when Father Macfadden's voice rang out reciting St Ninian's Collect in Latin. 'I enjoyed the evident pleasure of the Whithorn staff, who were so thrilled to learn about this additional dimension to their story of Whithorn's past. The candle-lit prayers in the crypt

at the priory were touching, especially as we remembered Bosworth; and the Latin prayer, with the requiem playing in the background, really transported you back in time giving a sense of shared experience with Richard and his contemporaries. I love the fact that there are still things to discover about Richard and the people and places associated with him.’ (June McIntyre)

It was a day to remember and it is appropriate to end with these words from Philippa Langley. ‘What a stunningly beautiful place Whithorn is! The most beautiful vista was from its ancient harbour, with the Irish Sea stretching out to the Cumbrian hills ahead. These hills that Richard would have known so well were so close we felt like we could touch them. Simply stunning, it took our breath away. We received the warmest of welcome from everyone there and it was an honour to unveil the new interpretation board in the museum so that all of Whithorn’s visitors may now know of the saint’s connection with King Richard. Highly recommended, and I’ll be back!’

We hope that other Ricardians will also be able to go to this very special place.

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