

six degrees of whiteness: finbarr, finnian, finnian, ninian, candida casa and hwiterne

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Abstract

In the Spring 2001 issue of *The Innes Review*, Thomas Owen Clancy presented a compelling argument for the identification of Saint Ninian of Whithorn, Saint Finnian of Moville, Saint Finnian of Clonard and Saint Finbarr of Cork as a single historical figure. This followed on from lengthy argument amongst scholars of early medieval Ireland concerning the identity, ethnicity, and probable conflation of the three Irish saints. One view, advanced by Pádraig Ó Riain, was that the ‘original’ form of the name was the Gaelic form Findbarr, from which Finnian was derived by hypocorism. Clancy posits a British origin for the name, and advances scribal error as the final step in the evolution of the name through Uinniau to Ninian. The common element in the Gaelic names, fin, and its British equivalent, uin, mean ‘white’. Ninian’s foundation in south-western Scotland is called in Latin *Ad Candidam Casam*, in Old English *Hwiterne*, both also denoting whiteness. This is generally held to reflect either the physical nature of Ninian’s church (limewashed or of pale stone) or the moral nature of its inhabitants (pure and shining). This paper argues for a further alternative: that the name of the place is derived from the name of its founder.

In the five hundredth and sixty-fifth year of our Lord’s incarnation, when Justin the Less received the helm of the Roman Empire after Justinian, there came into Britain from Ireland a priest and abbot, distinguished by his monastic dress and way of life, by name Columba, to preach the word of God to the provinces of the northern Picts, that is to say, to those which are separated from their southern regions by steep and rugged mountain ridges. For these southern Picts, who have their sees within (i.e. to the south of) the same mountains, had long before, as the story goes, forsaken the error of idolatry and received the faith of truth, when the word was preached to them by Nynia, a most reverent bishop and holy man of the nation of the Britons, who had been regularly instructed at Rome in the faith and mystery of the truth; whose episcopal see, distinguished by the name and by the church of St Martin, where he himself, together with many other saints, rests in the body, the English nation has just now begun to govern. The place, which belongs to the province of the Bernicians, is called in the vernacular At

the White House, because he there built a church of stone in a manner to which the Britons were not accustomed.¹

So says the venerable Bede, writing in Northumbria in the early eighth century, in our earliest textual source for St Ninian of Whithorn. For many years, scholars, relying on this source, took Bede at his word, and accepted that Saint Ninian, a British priest, had indeed ministered to the southern Picts from his base at Whithorn. Then more recently, for many years, scholars rejected Bede's information concerning the southern Picts, primarily on the grounds that it is unlikely that Ninian could have conducted a Whithorn-based mission into what is taken to be the region surrounding modern Fife in eastern Scotland.² More recently again, significant questions have been raised concerning Ninian's identity. Five years ago, Thomas Owen Clancy published an important article 'The real St Ninian', which sets out an insightful and credible proposal that the character of Ninian of Whithorn is identical to Finnian of Moville and Finnian of Clonard.³

Clancy proposes the development of the phenomenon of Ninian as follows. Around 510 or so, a Briton named something like *Uinnobarros was born. Uinnobarros's intimates used the hypocorism *Uinniau* for him. He trained at a pre-existing church and monastery at what is now Whithorn and became a bishop. At some point in his career he spent time in Ireland, where he was known by the Gaelic variants of his name and pet-name,

¹ Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, trans J MacQueen, *St Nynia* (Polygon, 1990; rev ed John Donald, 2005) 1-2: '*Siquidem anno incarnationis dominicae DLXV, quo tempore gubernaculum Romani imperii post Iustinianum Iustinus minor accepit, uenit de Hibernia presbyter et abbas habitu et uita monachi insignis, nomine Columba, Britanniam, praedicaturus uerbum Dei prouinciis septentrionalium Pictorum, hoc est eis quae arduis et horrentibus montium iugis ab australibus eorum sunt regionibus sequestratae. Namque ipsi australes Picti, qui intra eosdem montes habent sedes, multo ante tempore, ut perhibent, relicto errore idolatriae, fidem ueritatis acceperant, praedicante eis uerbum Ninia episcopo reuerentissimo et sanctissimo uiro de natione Brettonum, qui erat Romae regulariter fidem et mysteria ueritatis edoctus; cuius sedem episcopatus, sancti Martini episcopi nomine et ecclesia ensignem, ubi ipse etiam corpore una cum pluribus sanctis requiescit, iam nunc Anglorum gens obtinet. Qui locus, ad prouinciam Berniciorum pertinens, uulgo uocatur Ad Candidam Casam, eo quod ibi ecclesiam de lapide, insolito Brettonibus more, fecerit.*

² See, eg, A A M Duncan, 'Bede, Iona and the Picts' 1-42 in R Davis and J Wallace-Hadrill, *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages* (Clarendon, 1981) at p 28-33; D Brooke, *Wild Men and Holy Places: St Ninian, Whithorn and the Medieval Realm of Galloway* (Canongate, 1994) 23-33: Brooke is one of the few to support the notion of a Ninianic mission to the southern Picts, but advances a complex argument for a Pictish presence in south-eastern Scotland, much further south than Fife, in order to do so.

³ T O Clancy, 'The real St Ninian', *The Innes Review* 52/1 (Spring 2001) 1-28.

Finbarr and *Finnian*. He went on to found a number of centres in Ireland, the principal of which was Moville. Either he or his followers also founded Clonard. He was a scholar, corresponded with Gildas, composed an important penitential, and trained the young Saint Columba. He seems to have died in 579, at a good old age.

Clancy suggests that after Ninian's death each of his main foundations developed a strong cult to him, and each created a distinct local figure and story for him, including different commemoration dates. In Ireland, the cults of Finnian of Moville and Finnian of Clonard, among others, developed. His cult in Renfrewshire and Ayrshire, immediately north of Whithorn, seems to be based on activities of Uinniau and his followers centred at Inchinnan, a place-name including the element *Uin*. Churches dedicated to him appeared in the region in the period after his death. At Inchinnan itself, the dedication was later replaced by that to Saint Conval, which may support the earliness of the original dedication. The cult also spread throughout the north-west of Scotland, probably retransmitted there from Ireland, with dedications derived from forms including *Barrfhind*, the inversion of *Finbarr*.

His reputation at Whithorn led to the spread of his cult from there in the sixth and seventh centuries, which continued unaltered around Galloway and led to local placenames, dedications and legends, in the name of Uinniau. A hagiographical text was written about him at Whithorn. After the monastery of Whithorn was taken over as a bishopric by the church of Northumbria, this text acquired an existence independent of what might be called the 'folk' or local cults of the saint. The text was acquired by Pecthelm, the first Northumbrian bishop of Whithorn, who may also have been the one who revised it to include assertions useful to Northumbria. Amongst these are likely to have been the insistence on the saint's links with Rome and with Saint Martin of Tours, as well as the assertion of jurisdiction over the southern Picts, further divorcing the literary Ninian from the original subject. At this stage, scribal error introducing an initial N for U produced the form Ninniau. It should be noted that the confusion of N and U is one of the most common of all scribal errors.

Clancy further proposes that Pecthelm communicated the substance of this text to Bede, who used it as the basis for his reference to Ninian in the *Historia Ecclesiastica*. This same text also formed the basis for the somewhat later *Miracula Ninie Episcopi* and for the twelfth-century Life of Ninian attributed to Aelred of Rievaulx, in which the saint's name takes on the further corrupted form of Ninianus.⁴ After the composition of this

⁴ *Miracula Ninie Episcopi* ed W MacQueen, *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society* 37 (1950) 21-57; *Vita Niniani* ed A P Forbes, 137-157 in *The Historians of Scotland V: St Ninian and St Kentigern* (Edinburgh, 1874).

work, Whithorn and its supporters vigorously promoted the cult of Ninian: based on the literary tradition thus created, rather than on any living tradition. This resulted in a further spate of dedications based on the book form *Ninianus*.

Clancy summarises:

What prevents the idea of ‘Ninian the scribal error’ from being just a passing joke is the exclusiveness of the two saints’ territories in time and space: they barely overlap. Uinniau is the real saint, existing in local knowledge and church dedications and producing a baffling range of by-forms for his names, in both Gaelic and British; Ninian is the Northumbrian literary saint, existing in a constrained selection of genetically linked manuscript texts’.⁵

Indeed, this baffling range of Gaelic and British names supports Clancy’s hypothesis. There is something rather uncomfortable about the idea of a Scottish saint, particularly one from the linguistically complex region of Galloway, without such a baffling array, which is effectively what we would be left with if we were to reject Clancy’s thesis. It is only if Clancy’s argument is accepted that Ninian is connected with the range of other names: Uinniau, Finnian, and so on.

John MacQueen objects to Clancy’s hypothesis that a divergent literary tradition could grow up independent of the traditions on the ground around Whithorn.⁶ However, his argument is based on a notion of continuity at Whithorn, which is not adequately supported. As Martin Grimmer has argued, the fact that Anglo-Saxons used a previously extant British ecclesiastical site does not equate to continuity in any meaningful sense.⁷ Even if chronological continuity were present at Whithorn, that would not be evidence of continuity of traditions, beliefs and practices. Further, as Clancy points out, the Northumbrian literary tradition of Ninian rapidly became geographically divorced from the community of Whithorn.⁸

The crucial part of Clancy’s thesis, for present purposes, is the recognition of the initial element of Ninian as the variously spelt and pronounced element *uin* or *finn*, variants on the p- and q-Celtic words for ‘white’. Indeed, I would suggest that the entire name postulated by Clancy, **Uinnobarros*, translates best as something like ‘Blondie’. The second

⁵ Clancy, 23.

⁶ MacQueen, *St Nynia*, 152-154.

⁷ M Grimmer, ‘British Christian continuity in Anglo-Saxon England: the case of Sherborne/*Lanprobi*’, *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 1 (2005) 51-64.

⁸ Clancy, 23.

element, *barr*, meaning a head of hair, appears in the minority of the recorded versions of the saint's name.

Departing temporarily from the identity of Ninian, I turn now to his 'White House'. None of the evidence we have for the name of this place predates Bede, and it is possible that all of the evidence we do have derives from the same source used by Bede. The possibility therefore exists that the placename is an Anglo-Saxon invention: in the sense of cultural milieu, not necessarily of language. Bede's expression is the Latin '*Ad Candidam Casam*', which is what he says Ninian's place is habitually called.⁹ He does not say by whom. '*Ad Candidam Casam*' is generally translated as 'The White House', although the Latin includes a preposition: 'at the white house'.

The translation of '*casa*' as 'house' might perhaps be acceptable, but it is probably better rendered as 'hut' or 'cabin'.¹⁰ It seems a slightly incongruous term to apply to a building of stone, as Bede asserts that it is applied. Bede's assertion is echoed and embroidered by the subsequent Life of Ninian, where Ninian is reported to have visited St Martin at Tours, and 'Ninian asked the saint to give him stonemasons, declaring that his purpose was to imitate both the faith of the Holy Roman Church and their method of building churches and establishing ecclesiastical offices'.¹¹

This resonates unmistakably with an entirely separate matter: Bede's report of Ceolfrith's letter to the Pictish king Nechtan, in which Bede alleges that Nechtan 'asked to have craftsmen sent to him to build a church among his people after the Roman manner'.¹² However, there is no mention of such craftsmen in Ceolfrith's reply as reported by Bede. If Bede's version is indeed a true copy of an original letter, then the absence of reference to the craftsmen allows the possibility that Nechtan's alleged request was fabricated or exaggerated by Bede. I suspect that this dogged obsession with the building of churches in the Roman style is another of Bede's personal quirks, rather like his ubiquitous worrying of the subject of Easter reckoning. These are both symptomatic of his all-pervasive urge for orthodoxy, and I would assert that just as Easter dating and the tonsure

⁹ Although MacQueen (2) gives 'is called in the vernacular', he accepts in the supplement to his revised edition (133) Charles Thomas's suggestion that '*uulgo* has its classical force: "commonly, habitually, all over the area"; C Thomas, *Whithorn's Christian Beginnings* (First Whithorn Lecture; Whithorn, 1992) 16.

¹⁰ According to Duncan, 'Bede, Iona and the Picts', 29, the Latin texts known to have been circulating in the British Isles at the time of Bede all use '*casa*' to indicate a rural dwelling, and in the case of Isidore, a dwelling constructed of stakes and wattles.

¹¹ *Vita Niniani* trans W MacQueen, 102-124 in MacQueen, *St Nynia*, at p 108.

¹² Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* V:21 trans J Campbell, *Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English People and Other Selections* (Washington, 1968) 295.

seemed to Bede to be benchmarks of orthodoxy, so also was the matter of church building. This is an area which has not yet been explored to its full potential. The urge to attribute orthodoxy to his subjects is one that Bede shared with Aelred, putative author of the *Life of Ninian*.¹³

Whithorn has been extensively, although not exhaustively, excavated. Based on her close contact with Peter Hill, who led many years of archaeological excavation at Whithorn, Daphne Brooke, in 1994, made much of the finding of what appears to have been essentially a rubbish heap from the British phase on the site. In this heap,

There were lumps of grey lime, sometimes with an incomplete crust of white calcium carbonate. The lime probably derived from carboniferous limestone, burnt and then pulverised and slaked. The calcium carbonate crust would have formed if piles of the unmixed lime had been exposed to the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. A stone building rendered with this material would acquire a surface that was brilliant white after rain, and dull white in dry weather.¹⁴

Unfortunately, Brooke was forced to acknowledge that during the excavations ‘There was no sign of the stone church Bede speaks of’. However, she continued hopefully, ‘if it was built at the top of the hill, under the present ruins of the medieval cathedral, the “shining white” building rubbish buried in the revetted bank may be evidence of its construction’.¹⁵ In his 1997 report of the excavations, Peter Hill also commented on the ‘spreads of builders’ waste’ scattered around the site, consisting of lumps of slaked lime containing particles of clay.¹⁶ He noted that the lime was probably intended for ‘cement, plaster or limewash’ but that it had not been mixed with any other components to create these compounds before being discarded. There is therefore no way of knowing whether the lime was intended as a construction material or as a decorative finish. Although the builders’ waste is recorded in connection with Stage 2 of the site, Hill notes that the stratigraphy is in this case unreliable and the lime cannot be placed precisely in the sequence of site use.¹⁷ This means that the lime does not necessarily belong to the period in which Bede claims that Ninian built his stone church. Hill, too, noted that there was no sign of

¹³ J Fraser, ‘Northumbrian Whithorn and the making of St Ninian’ 40-59 in *The Innes Review* 53/1 (Spring 2002) at p 50.

¹⁴ Brooke, 16-17.

¹⁵ Brooke, 19.

¹⁶ P Hill, *Whithorn and St Ninian: The Excavation of a Monastic Town, 1984-91* (Stroud, 1997) 80-81.

¹⁷ Hill, *Whithorn and St Ninian*, 81.

a stone church, and speculated that the lime was ‘probably associated with the construction of a building (or buildings) on the crown of the hill’.¹⁸

The difficulty with Brooke’s suggestion of a shining white stone church at the top of the hill lies in the nature of early medieval ecclesiastical settlements. As Peter Hill pointed out to me, when one approaches the site of Whithorn, particularly from the direction of the nearest landing point at Isle of Whithorn (and in the water-borne society of early medieval north Britain this would have been the most common means of access), Whithorn is virtually invisible until one is within its boundaries.¹⁹ The same is to a certain extent true of the modern land-bound approach by road from the north, although somewhat obscured by the modern village. I have since observed that this is the case with every early medieval ecclesiastical settlement site in Scotland that I have visited, with the possible and anomalous exception of Iona.²⁰ The purpose of such site selection is clear. If it cannot be seen, it cannot easily be raided. Ecclesiastical settlements characteristically contained valuable books and altar goods, and it would be a logical and sensible precaution to minimise susceptibility to unwelcome visitors. It is worth noting, too, that most of the prominent ecclesiastical figures of this period had a fairly vigorous involvement in secular politics, which would have made their settlements potential targets for attack for purposes other than theft.

I suggest that Brooke’s idea of a stone church on the highest point within the settlement at Whithorn, rendered with a compound that is ‘brilliant white’ after rain, is incompatible with the characteristic strategically concealed, defensible site that exists at Whithorn and many other early medieval ecclesiastical settlements in Scotland. Therefore I would argue that the ‘*casa*’ at Whithorn, despite the best efforts of a good number of writers from Bede onwards to convince us that it was, is unlikely to have been an impressive white stone church.²¹ It seems more likely to have been a far more modest, or at least less visible, building.

What then of the ‘*candida*’? Whilst it can also have meanings implying virtue and beauty, the primary meaning of *candida* appears to be simply ‘white’. The possibility that it might have been used here to describe the morals of Ninian and his followers cannot be entirely ruled out.

¹⁸ Hill, *Whithorn and St Ninian*, 81.

¹⁹ P Hill, *pers comm* (March 1996).

²⁰ eg a’Chill, Canna; Kingarth, Bute; Kildalton, Islay; Portmahomack, Easter Ross; Applecross, Wester Ross. At Iona, the monastery would not have been visible from the harbour, although it would presumably have been visible from a boat on the water close to the site.

²¹ Charles Thomas is a notable exception: ‘But continued and exquisitely-detailed search for an actual Candida Casa building may come to match the Hunting of the Snark; pointless, because the object of quest never existed’: C Thomas, *Whithorn’s Christian Beginnings* (Whithorn, 1992) 17.

However, it seems more likely to me that it is a direct translation of an existing appellation. An early medieval British or Gaelic ecclesiastic, required to translate the element *uin* or *finn*, ‘white’, into Latin, might well choose *candida*. We are not without precedent for translations of native Celtic terms into Latin amongst the ecclesiastics of the period; for that we need look no further than Adomnán’s *Life of Columba* or the Annals of Ulster.²²

Charles Thomas, drawing on earlier scholarship by Smith and Rivet, suggested that the element ‘*candida*’ translated an early British placename **Leucouia*, taken into Latin as *Leucopibia* during the Roman period, which has been interpreted as referring to the Whithorn district.²³ There are, however, significant difficulties with this interpretation. Firstly, it cannot be conclusively shown that the location referred to as *Leucopibia* was Whithorn. Secondly, since the name was directly adopted into Latin in the Roman period, it would seem unnecessary for it to later be translated into Latin. Finally, Peter Hill made the convincing suggestion that *Leucopibia* is based on the British root **luco-*, meaning marsh, which ‘would have been appropriate to the original topography of Whithorn’.²⁴

In my view, Bede’s *Ad Candidam Casam* translated a Celtic term which consisted of two elements. I think *casa* is best understood as implying some modest dwelling place, perhaps even in the sense of a monastic cell. *Candida* I take to be an attempt to directly translate a word containing, or even consisting of, the element *uin* or *finn*, ‘white’. *Candida Casa* might, then, translate best into English as something like ‘Blondie’s hut’. This name, specific to an important individual in the folk memory of the region, came to be applied to the site itself, which over time developed into something much bigger.

Another avenue for exploring the placename may be provided by considering what the Anglo-Saxons might have understood by the term in the slightly later recorded form in Anglo-Saxon, *Hwiterne*, on which the modern Whithorn is based. This form first appears in the Old English translation of Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, of the late ninth century. It is a compound of the Old English *hwíte*, meaning ‘white’, and *ærn*, whose meaning at its most general is ‘a dwelling’, and can refer more specifically to a great hall. It may be a direct recording of the site’s Celtic name in Old English, incorporating an Old English translation of the *uin/finn* element. Archibald Duncan noted that *Hwitærn* is unlikely to be a translation from

²² The most obvious examples are the placenames rendered by Adomnán from Irish into Latin: Adomnán, *Life of Columba* trans A O Anderson and M O Anderson (rev ed; Oxford, 1991) *passim*.

²³ Thomas, *Whithorn’s Christian Beginnings*, 16-17.

²⁴ Hill, *Whithorn and St Ninian*, 27.

the Latin.²⁵ While he was more inclined to think that *Candida Casa* was a translation of the Old English, I suggest that his arguments would apply equally well to a Latin translation of a Celtic original.

In the Latin, the order of the elements or words may give a clue as to the underlying Celtic term that has been translated. Word order in Latin is a highly complex matter. Nonetheless, the basic construction would normally see an adjective following its noun. Thus if the expression were intended to convey ‘white house’, it could be expected to appear as ‘*casa candida*’. The reversing of the word order is not conclusive, but tends to suggest that, rather than a description, this may be the translation of a Celtic name for the place.

Considering a possible underlying Celtic expression, a straightforward adjective and noun construction indicating ‘white house’ would place the element for ‘house’ before that for ‘white’. The same word order would apply if it were a genitival construction indicating ‘the house of *uin/finn*’. However, in compounds, where two nouns or a noun and an adjective are combined into a single word, the words tend to be combined in the reverse order to that in which they appear in other constructions. Thus the Celtic expression translated by *Candida Casa* and *Hwitern* may be a compound of the name *Uinniau* and the word for a hut. It is therefore possible that the names for Whithorn in Latin and Old English are translations of a Celtic name for the place, rather than translations of a Celtic description of it. There is no evidence that the names carry any implications about ecclesiastical architecture or colour schemes.

Thomas Owen Clancy has provided a solid basis for identifying Saint Ninian of Whithorn as that same saint who turns up in several places in Ireland. The various names attributed to that saint all imply a white head of hair. In both Britain and Ireland, and in both p- and q-Celtic he was better known by the hypocoristic form of his name, which removed the reference to hair and retained the element ‘white’. It is from there surely more a step of logic than a leap of faith to suggest that the name of his original cult centre reflects his own name. The meaning and implications of a name implying a white dwelling place have long been debated. I propose a reinvigoration of the debate, based on the possibility that it suggests not a white house, but the house of White.

²⁵ Duncan, *Bede, Iona and the Picts*, 29.