

## Saint Ninian

Most of the information we have about St. Ninian comes from three main sources. The earliest mention of Ninian of Whithorn is in a short passage of *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* by the Venerable Bede in ca. 731. *A Life of St. Ninian (Vita Sancti Niniani)* was written ca. 1160 by Ailred of Hexham, and in 1639 James Ussher discusses Ninian in his *Britannicarum Ecclesiarum Antiquitates*. Bede says that Ninian was of the British nation who had been instructed in Rome; that he made his church of stone, which was unusual among the Britons; that his episcopal see was named after St. Martin of Tours; that he preached to and converted the southern Picts; that his base was at "hwit ærn," which was in the province of the Bernicians; and that he was buried there, along with many other saints.

In the *Vita Sancti Niniani*, Ailred includes the following incidental information regarding St. Ninian: that his father was a Christian king; that he was consecrated a bishop in Rome and that he met Saint Martin in Tours; that St. Martin sent masons with him on his homeward journey, at his request; that these masons built a church of stone, situated on the shore, and on learning of St. Martin's death, Ninian dedicated the church to him; that a certain rich and powerful "King Tuduvallus" was converted by him; that he died after having converted the Picts and returned home, being buried in a stone sarcophagus near the altar of his church; and that he had once traveled with a holy person named "Plebia" Variations of the story add that he had actually met St. Martin, that his father was a Christian king, and that he was buried in a stone sarcophagus near the altar of his church. Further variations assert that he left for Ireland, and died there in 432. Dates for his birth are derived from the traditional mention of St. Martin, who died in 397.

Ussher says that Ninian left *Candida Casa* for Cluayn-coner in Ireland, and eventually died in Ireland; that his mother was a Spanish princess; that his father wished to regain him after having assented to his training for an ecclesiastical state; that a bell comes from heaven to call together his disciples; that a wooden church was raised by him, with beams delivered by stags; and that a harper with no experience at architecture was the builder of the church. He adds that a smith and his son, named respectively "Terna" and "Wyn," witnessed a miracle by Ninian and that the saint was granted lands to be called "Wytterna." In addition, Skene attributes the "traditional" date of Ninian's death (16 September 432) ultimately to Ussher's *Life of Ninian*, noting that the date is "without authority".

Historically, there is little doubt that St. Ninian carried out his mission in Scotland, although there is some confusion about the areas which he visited. The evidence of his influence survives in the large number of churches dedicated to him throughout Scotland and in several locations in northern England. He was known for his miracles, and these led to many conversions. Following St. Ninian's death, the missionary foundation he helped to create, allowed Christianity to grow in strength and survive in Scotland.

A Cathedral was built to house the Saints remains and his church and shrine became a centre of pilgrimage. His shrine at Whithorn has seen many pilgrims, King James IV of Scotland, was said to be a regular visitor. Today the Cathedral is in ruins, but pilgrimages are still made to Whithorn and St. Ninian's cave, to which it is said he retired when he needed peace to meditate and pray.