

Nynia¹ in Northern Pictland

WHEN the Roman Empire was fast loosening its hold on Britain, Nynia appeared on the shores of the Solway as a General of that new Army of the Cross which was destined to enter territories barred to the legions of Cæsar. Ancient traces of St. Ninian, as he is generally called, exist throughout the length of Scotland, and extend even into the northern islands; but historians have failed to explain many of these, and have been content to limit the presence and work of the Saint to Northern England and to that part of Scotland south of the Grampians.

The occurrence of traditions and names in Northern Alba which persistently point back to Nynia's actual presence has provoked observers frequently to extract the underlying story.

Encouragement is afforded from the western coast of Scotland. From Celtic literature we know that many place-names and place-memories in the West reflect accurately persons and events of long ago. I-Colum-Kil, the name of Hy, meaning the island of Colum of the Church, is a little history in itself, and would tell Iona's distinction, although no literature had survived. *Cairncul-ri-Erin*,² on the height of Colonsay, is another name speaking history, although it has been preserved through hundreds of years by people who did not know that it faithfully recalled that incident in the journey of Columba when he made a final effort to get away from the sight of his native land. *Cuchullin*, the name given to the principal hills of Skye, was for long meaningless to many, and appeared to be only an accidental collocation of syllables, resembling the name of the romantic Irish hero; but the revival of Celtic literature brought to light *The Wooing of Eimer*, with its substratum of history, which tells of Cuchullin's

¹The Latinized form of the Celtic name. The final "n" in the spelling *Ninian* marks the usual Celtic diminutive of honour super-imposed on the Latinized name.

²The place of turning the back on Ireland.

journey to Skye and his sojourn at the house of the instructress, Scathach.³

Why should ancient place-names and place-memories have less accurate significance, or a less true story, on the east coast than on the west? We know from writings concerning St. Columba and other Irish churchmen which survive, that if the records had all perished and we were left with only local tradition, place-names, sculptured stones, ruins of cells, and philological features of speech, we could reconstruct a most faithful picture of their labours, learning, skill, habits, and peculiarities. The reconstructed picture would be in many cases truer than the picture of these men which we see in the surviving records. It would be scientific, and free from the clumsy elaborations of chroniclers who neither appreciated nor understood the Celtic Church. Indeed, every careful historian of the early northern Church is compelled, in the interests of truth, to use local knowledge to correct the extravagances of interested redactors of ancient Celtic manuscripts.

Bede and Ailred are the chief authorities in the older literature on Nynia. The former wrote two and a half centuries, and the latter seven centuries after Nynia's death. Although Ailred's highly-coloured work cannot rank in authority with Bede's, it ought not to be forgotten that he had not only Bede's work before him while he wrote, but a certain old life⁴ of Nynia which has not survived. Probably this old work, which offended Ailred's literary sense, provided him with the few evident facts that exist in his book.

Professor Zimmer makes a severely critical estimate of what we may regard as 'reliable' concerning Nynia. 'Bede tells us,'⁵ he says, 'that about the year 400 a Briton named Nynia founded a monastery on the peninsula of Wigton, which extends into the Irish Sea between the Firths of Solway and Clyde. Because of its stone church, it bore the name of *Ad Candidam Casam*. Nynia had received his theological training in Rome, and he greatly revered Martin of Tours, perhaps through having come into personal contact with him. From his newly-founded monastery Nynia spread Christianity among the *Picts* living south of the Grampians.'⁶

The words which Professor Zimmer has italicised are worthy

³ Maclean's *Literature of the Celts*, p. 158. ⁴ 'Liber barbario scriptus.'

⁵ *Hist. Eccl.*, iii. 4.

⁶ From A. Meyer's translation of Zimmer's article.

of attention, though not for his reasons. He follows other modern historians in restricting Nynia's work to *southern* Pictland. But it is while narrating Columba's labours among the *Northern* Picts that Bede tells how, long before, the *Southern* Picts 'abandoned idolatry and embraced the Christian faith through the preaching of the Word by Bishop Ninian.'⁷ Bede is simply balancing the work of the two great men rhetorically. It is well authenticated that Nynia laboured in Ireland;⁸ but it would be as unfair to use Bede's reference to the work among the southern Picts to discredit this, as to use it to infer that Nynia never passed into northern Pictish territories.

We now turn to Ailred. Unlike Bede, he gives details of Nynia's work. In one of the most trustworthy passages in the biography, which looks as if it had been incorporated from the older life, he tells how Nynia moved about in company with many holy brethren; and that, as the effect of his preaching, the Gospel was received, the meeting-places of the heathen were thrown down, and churches erected. Nynia ordained Presbyters, consecrated Bishops, conferred ecclesiastical honours, and divided the whole land into parishes.⁹

This account bears credibility on its face. Its terms belong to Ailred's time, but its meaning carries us back to the period of Nynia and to ecclesiastical habits with which Ailred was unfamiliar. It was not easy to make intelligible to his highly-organised Church the picture of a Bishop wandering about in the fashion of Pictish Churchmen as a religious clan-leader with a *muinntir*, single-handed consecrating Bishops without dioceses and appointed to wander like himself, leaving missionary representatives of the faith in one place and another; but Ailred did his best in the words referred to.

By writing of Presbyters, and especially of parishes, in connection with Nynia, Ailred has staggered the modern writers, who forget that Ailred's avowed purpose in superseding the ancient life¹⁰ of Nynia was to represent the saint 'in the clear light of Latin speech'—in other words, to give the founder of the Caledonian Church and his organisation a twelfth century aspect and nomenclature. Fortunately the truth has survived the adaptation of its garments to the fashion. In Ailred's time men knew well who deserved credit for the well-defined parishes

⁷ Dr. Campbell in Prin. Story's *Ch. of Scotland. Eccl. Hist.*, iii. 4.

⁸ Ussher quoting the Irish life, since lost. ⁹ *Life of Ninian*, chap. vi.

¹⁰ 'Liber barbario scriptus.'—Ailred.

of the highly-organised Roman Church, because the creation of parishes had been going on before their eyes. What the historian wishes to credit to Nynia is the placing of missionaries in certain definite districts throughout the length of Scotland.¹¹

Archæological inquiries fully vindicate the historian. The student of Pictish antiquities might justly amplify Ailred's testimony. Names, memories, and church sites connected with Nynia are found in northern Scotland and in the islands, associated with the hut circles, and duns, which mark the Pictish villages. The places between Ross and the Grampians, where Nynia was anciently commemorated,¹² though now mostly destitute of Pictish remains, are known to have been important centres of Pictish life.

The following list, though not complete, gives an idea of how Nynia spaced the seed-plots of the faith throughout the East and North-East of Scotland, to which he apparently confined himself after turning the Grampians:

St. Ninian's Isle, Dunrossness, Shetland.—On this island, and on an assured Pictish site, a chapel existed until recent times bearing Nynia's name.¹³ In the burial ground attached to this ancient church an important stone¹⁴ was found with Ogam lettering. The Ogams have been transliterated by Professor Rhys and Mr. E. W. B. Nicholson, whose genius for Pictish inscriptions is phenomenal. Mr. Nicholson's transliteration is *lesmeqqnanammovvest* (= *Les Meqq Nan am Movvest*); and his translation—*Enclosure of Mac Nan in Mobhaist*. Mobhaist = My Baptizer, and he considers that this ecclesiastical title had come to designate the property; just as people say, 'The minister's,' when they may refer either to the manse or to the glebe.¹⁵ This is ingenious, but it is too forced a meaning for a compound word, and especially such a word as Mobhaist.

It appears to me that the Ogam legend is manifestly *Les Meqq Nanam Movvest*. The habitation of the Sons of Nynia the

¹¹ 'Per certas parrochias.'—Ailred.

¹² St. Vigeans and Dyke have yielded sculptured stones which show that the Church in these districts was well-planted among a Pictish population. See E. W. B. Nicholson on the stones of Ancient Alban.

¹³ See Sibbald's Description, *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scotl.*, xii. 24. Dr. Joseph Anderson, E. W. B. Nicholson.

¹⁴ Presented by Mr. Goudie to the Museum of National Antiquities.

¹⁵ See vernacular inscriptions of Ancient Alban, by E. W. B. Nicholson, M.A., Oxford.

Baptizer; or, if the *les* was the gift of a convert—the habitation of the sons of Nynia, my Baptizer.

Meqq may be singular; in any sense, it is to be taken in the scriptural sense,¹⁶ or as used by Columba.¹⁷ *Nan* is the pure name; the last syllable is the usual diminutive of affection; and the final *n* is changed to *m* before the first letter of the following word. *Mo* is the usual prefix of saintly honour. When added to *Bhaiste* it makes the word a title. The Celts have always had a fondness for alternative names. 'The Baptizer' would be a natural and appropriate name for such a pioneer of the faith as Nynia.

Nynia is the Latin form of a Celtic name meaning 'the little,' and *Mobhaist* would seem more complimentary to his converts than the real name, which would not be uncommon. In Ireland Nynia was called Monenn.

Ninian's Isle, North Orkneys.—Believed to be a similar station to the above. This island has had its Pictish remains more obliterated by the Norsemen than the former. Its name was corrupted by the Norsemen into Rinanse, and in later times into Ronaldsey; now known as North Ronaldshay.¹⁸

St. Ninian's Church (ruins), Stove, South Ronaldshay.—The remains of this Church were associated with traces of a Pictish settlement.

Church and Burial-ground of Ninian, Sybster, Wick Bay, Caithness. This Church was in the midst of Pictish remains.

Ninian's Church (ruins) and Churchyard, Navidale, Sutherland.—The burial-ground is still used, and is picturesquely situated on a cliff overlooking the North Sea. Close at hand are the ruins of a Pictish village.

Formerly ruins of Churches of Ninian existed at *Roskeen*, and at *Balcony, Kiltearn*.

The Church in Easter Ross from which Fearn Abbey was founded.—It is impossible on the strength of available information to say whether this church should be located at Edderton or somewhere in the Tarbat peninsula. Ferquhard's Abbey was first founded at Edderton, but owing to 'tribal hostility,' the Abbey-seat was removed to Fearn.

The remarkable feature in the history of Fearn Abbey is that

¹⁶ 1 Timothy, i. 2.

¹⁷ Diormit called Columba 'father,' and Columba spoke of the members of his *muintir* as children.

¹⁸ See J. M. Mackinlay.

it originated from one of Nynia's Pictish Churches. The Abbey kept its reverence for Nynia, and continued its connection with Whithorn into the Roman Catholic period.¹⁹

The tradition about Fearn Abbey, deprived of impossibilities and embellishment, is that the King came North to quell some disturbances. He called for the assistance of Ferquhard, which was given; and Ferquhard vowed that, if successful in the campaign, he would build a house to the holy man whose representatives he might first meet afterwards. Ferquhard was successful, and the first religious people he met were from a house of Nynia.²⁰

This tradition has for long pointed to the existence of an ancient house of Nynia in Easter Ross. The historians were so perplexed by it that some of them made Ferquhard's adventures take place in Southern Scotland, conveniently near Whithorn, as if *Candida Casa* had been the only house of Nynia in the kingdom.

Through the kindness of Dr. J. M. Joass, the learned minister of Golspie, I have seen a complete verification of the tradition concerning the existence of a strong Pictish religious centre in the Tarbat peninsula. This is a lettered stone taken from Tarbat Manse garden wall. It is evidently the fragment of a cross, and the lettering is the Celtic semi-uncials, which palaeographers ascribe to about the eighth century. The lettering is much worn, but Dr. Joass has deciphered as follows:

IN NOMINE IHU CHRI
CRUX CHRI
IN COMMEMORATIONE
RHEODATII
QIESCAT IN CHRO.

In the *Book of the Four Masters*²¹ there is the following entry, which speaks for itself:

'The Age of Christ 758.

Rheoddaidhe, Abbot of Fearn died.'

Ninian's Church at Dyke, Morayshire.—One of the unread

¹⁹ See list of Fearn Abbots in the Roman Catholic period.

²⁰ See the various writings about the Earls of Ross.

²¹ The connection of Nynia and afterwards *Candida Casa* with Ireland and Irish pupils is well known.

Ogam stones, with distinctively Pictish symbols,²² was dug up while preparing the foundation of the present Church of Dyke.

Churches of Nynia formerly existed at:

Enzie (Rathven).
Bellie (Fochabers).
Andat of Methlick.
Stonehaven.
St. Vigeans.
*Arbroath.*²³

At *St. Vigeans* is to be seen a stone, taken from the Church-yard, with undoubted Pictish symbols, and lettered in Ogam and Latin half-uncials. This stone makes several things certain. The original Church of *St. Vigeans* was Pictish. When the stone was erected the Church had landed property, and was so firmly established that it could look after it. The clergy were tonsured in Celtic fashion.²⁴ The ecclesiastic in charge when the stone was erected was Drost. His neighbours were the children of 'the Judge.' The original owner of the land was one 'Fergus.'

Those who credit the Christianising of Eastern and Northern Pictland wholly to the Dalriad missionaries should note that no Ogam-marked stone has yet been discovered in the old Dalriad territory; that the Ogam-marked march-stones are singularly associated with a Pictish Church; and that the district of the Ogam stones is also the district containing the Churches planted by Nynia.

A glance at a map of Scotland will show that, in planting his stations, Nynia arranged to join the northern mainland and islands to the province of the South Pictish Church mainly along the coast-line. He appears always to have chosen places naturally accessible to the interior, but never far away from the seashore. One can understand that he wished his people to be in touch with the sea, which offered a ready way of escape or an easy means of keeping the line of communications open during tribal disturbances.

The foregoing list of ancient foundations bearing Nynia's

²² See Nicholson, p. 57, and the two statistical accounts.

²³ See Forbes, *Kalendars*.

²⁴ Nicholson, p. 12. Nynia's name has also lingered in the traditions associated with the Old Celtic Church at Turriff. His portrait in fresco was found in the walls of the ancient Church of *St. Congan*.

name means more than a like list of later foundations. Until the end of the seventh century churches were named after their living founders, not after dead ecclesiastics of eminence,²⁵ consequently they support the Orkney and Caithness traditions, and point to Nynia's actual presence and work. The district where Nynia's Sutherland Church was established furnishes a good illustration of the universality of this practice two centuries after Nynia's time. For thirteen hundred years the ruins of Celtic churches in the dales of Sutherland and Caithness have preserved for us in their names the names of the leading members of St. Donnan's *muinntir*, and their testimony has been recently corroborated from an ancient Irish book.²⁶

A place-word may cover a world of history. For example, close by Nynia's churches are other churches known to have been founded later by missionaries from Ireland. These are all designated by the name of the founder, with the prefix *Kil*; while Nynia's churches lack the prefix. This absence of the prefix not only indicates very decidedly the greater antiquity of Nynia's foundations, but points to the missionary efforts of an organisation which did not make the anchorite's cell the nucleus of a congregation, like the missionaries of purely Irish origin and training. Nynia, as Ailred, or the old biography which he used, conveys, appears to have entered a district for a short time only, to have preached, made converts, suggested a church, and to have left the new flock in proper charge.

The reality and success of Nynia's northern mission helps us to understand how, until the Norse invasions, a highly-organised church of Celtic type could have existed in the Orkney and Shetland islands, and even in Iceland. The Bressay Stone,²⁷ with its Ogam legend, not only shows the sculptured thought of the imaginative Celt, but portrays ecclesiastics with the official *bachuil* in their hands, evidently enjoying settled comfort and authority. Such a bell as that recovered at Saverough in Orkney was not rung until it was as much the custom to go to worship as it is to-day. It would take at least two centuries of popular and acceptable ministry to bring the Christians of the isles to the *bachuil* and bell stage of organisation.

²⁵ Haddan & Stubbs, *Councils*, i. 155. There is one possible exception—Whithorn itself. Nynia, out of respect to Martin, established Whithorn on the lines of Martin's house at Tours, and Bede speaks of it as a dedication.

²⁶ *The Martyrology of Tallagh*.

²⁷ See plate in Dr. Anderson's *Introduction to Orkneyinga Saga*, xiv-xvii.

Some historians have credited the Church of the northern isles to Columba. But the ministry of Columba or his disciples would neither have been acceptable nor popular in the islands. Archæologists and the *Historia Britonum* put it beyond doubt that the early islanders were Picts.²⁸ Columba²⁹ and the Dalriad missionaries did not know the Pictish tongue. Columba never went to the Orkneys, and so well aware was he of Orcadian hostility to his missionaries, that we find him appealing to Brude MacMeilcon to protect Cormac and others who had gone from Iona to the northern islands. Besides, Columba's Dalriad friends were the enemies of the Orcadian Picts. Aedan MacGabran wasted the Orkneys in 580, and apparently added them to the Dalriad kingdom. Brude MacBile recovered the islands for the Picts, and drove out the Dalriad Scots in 682. If the Columban Church had any early influence in the Orkneys, it would only be during the short and insecure period of the Dalriad occupation. It is plain that the Columban Church does not account for that evidently popular, well-developed, and well-organised insular church which is pointed to by Ari Frodi,³⁰ Dicuil,³¹ and by the inscriptions, ornamentation, and symbols on the ancient stones.

It has been stated that there were *dedications*³²—ancient dedications are meant—to St. Columba in Orkney. As has been pointed out, St. Columba was never in the Orkneys; and it was not the custom of the Celts to name their churches after those who were not their actual founders. A little inquiry would have shown that the old churches in Orkney and Eilan Colm do not commemorate Columcille, but Colum,³³ a bishop who laboured on the northern mainland and the northern islands.

Nynia's work explains the origin of the Church of the northern islands. Where are we to look for the base on which that Church depended for its continuation? Nynia's *Candida Casa* is the only place, seeing that Iona is out of the question.

It would be expected that Nynia would provide for his work in the North. As long as *Candida Casa* endured and venerated the work of Nynia, his foundations in the North would appeal to its care. Bede says Nynia was a Briton; but his house was in the territory of the Niduari Picts, and was very accessible to the Irish

²⁸ See Dr. Anderson, *Orkneyinga Saga*, p. x.

²⁹ Two Picts interpreted for him at the Court of Brude.

³⁰ *Islandingabók*. ³¹ *De Mensura Orbis Terrarum*.

³² Note on p. xiv., Dr. Anderson's *Introduction to the Orkneyinga Saga*.

³³ Colmus, *Camerarius*, 113.

Picts. The ministry from such a centre would be both intelligible and acceptable to the Picts of the north and the islands. When we remember that Nynia was an evangelist to the Irish, and instructed Irish pupils at Whitherne, it is uncertain whether we should follow the historians and call the survivals of his work 'Irish' in type, or simply *Pictish*, to distinguish them from what is Columban. 'Celtic' is not a word that helps here, because Pictish and Scotie remains are alike Celtic.

Owing to the Norsemen, who destroyed so much, the names of scores³⁴ of pre-Norse churches have perished. Nevertheless, evidence remains that neither Nynia nor his establishment at Whitherne forgot the work in the North. One of the most eminent men sent back from *Candida Casa* to the north was an Irishman—judging from the name an Irish Pict.³⁵ About the end of the fifth century Whitherne had as a pupil Finbarr, better known by the name of endearment, Finnian. He ultimately became a Bishop and Abbot of the famous religious College at Moyville, in Down. He had the honour of teaching Columba and of making him a deacon.

Finbarr is as greatly venerated in the tradition of the dales of Caithness as in Down. Though the memory of his work remains to this day, the fact that he is commemorated by the unmodified name suggests, as we know, that he laboured in the north while he was young, and did not remain long enough for the people to know him intimately. The halving of a name and the transformation of the retained part into a diminutive invariably followed the prolonged residence of an old teacher among the Celts.³⁶

One of Finbarr's Churches was at Dornoch, Sutherland. This Church looks as if it had been planted to fill up a long gap left by Nynia in his line of communications. It looked across the Dornoch Firth to Nynia's foundation on the Tarbat peninsula. Either it or a continuation survived until the beginning of the thirteenth century. So well did Finbarr impress the forms of the Picto-Irish Church on this foundation, that Dornoch, along with Turriff has the honour of maintaining Celtic ecclesiastical ways into the Roman Catholic period for many years.

The natives of Sutherland, influenced by Finbarr's successors,

³⁴ See Brand and Sibbald.

³⁵ Finnian of Clonard was a Pict.

³⁶ *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung*, 32, pp. 175-190.; and Heinrich Zimmer's article in the *Realencyclopädie für Protestantische Theologie*.

refused to recognise the first three Roman Catholic bishops of Caithness, and they were compelled to find a precarious existence in the Scandinavian section of the diocese. After the burning of Bishop Adam, the Roman Catholics consecrated a Celt, Gilbert of Moray, and he was the first bishop to popularise his Church at Dornoch. The memory of the older Church continued to survive in the celebration of Finbarr's festival and in the preservation of the burial-ground called by his name.³⁷

The Roman Catholics, who, in Dornoch as elsewhere, showed little appreciation of the ancient Celtic Church, dedicated their Cathedral to St. Mary. After Gilbert's death, he was canonised, and the Cathedral was dedicated anew to St. Mary and St. Gilbert.

Gilbert was beyond question a brilliant worker for his Church; but not even yet has he succeeded in displacing from the popular affection the more famous Irish Pict who gave Dornoch its first Church, who in the straths of Sutherland and Caithness continued the great work of Nynia, and who had the honour of teaching and first ordaining the renowned Columba of Hy.

ARCHIBALD BLACK SCOTT.

³⁷ Sutherland Charters.