



Saint Melangell & Saint Ninian

COMPARE AND CONTRAST THE LIVES OF ANY MALE AND FEMALE SAINT ASSOCIATED WITH THE CELTIC REGIONS. TO WHAT EXTENT ARE THESE HAGIOGRAPHICAL TEXTS SIMILAR IN PURPOSE AND TO WHAT EXTENT DO THEY SHARE SIMILAR MOTIFS. ARE ANY DIFFERENCES NOTABLE GIVEN THE GENDER OF THESE SAINTS?

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In this essay, I shall be comparing and contrasting the lives of Saint Melangell of Wales and Saint Ninian of Scotland. I will give a brief introduction to the *vita* of each saint, as well as discuss the authorship and purpose of the *vita* – before moving onto comparisons between the *vitae* and their depicted motifs and story, with a focus on each saint's gender and how they compare. The wider context of male and female saint *vitae* will also be explored and I will discuss the legacy of the two saints today.

Saint Melangell

Saint Melangell (Latin: *Monacella*) is a female Welsh saint associated with the hamlet of Pennant Melangell in modern-day Powys. She is the patron saint of hares. She is said to have been born at an unspecified date in the late sixth century and died c. AD 641.¹

Melangell is one of only two female saints in Wales for which Latin *vitae* exist, the other being Gwenffrewi (English: Winifred, Latin: *Wenefreda*). Only one extant *vita* is known, the *Historia Divae Monacellae*. The original manuscript is unfortunately lost, but several copies (both partial and incomplete) remain, the oldest of which is a partially complete document dating to the late sixteenth century.² Whilst there are some minor differences between the various versions, for the purposes of this essay I will be using the English translation of *Historia Divae Monacellae* published by Huw Pryce in 1994.³

¹ Extrapolation from the *vita*; Brochwel Ysgithrog is said to have been hunting in AD 604 when he comes across Melangell, who has already been there fifteen years at that point having left Ireland at an age she could get married – and later states she died 37 years later which, accounting for calendar inconsistencies, must be around AD 640 – 642 (went with the median) in at least her mid-60s.

² I am unable to ascertain where the earliest copy is currently held; sources from the 1990s (the Montgomeryshire Collection) state that it is held at South Glamorgan County Library in Cardiff but I think that may be outdated because I cannot find record of such a place anymore. It could potentially now be held at Cardiff Central Library but I could not find evidence of such in their records online.

³ Huw Pryce, 'A New Edition of the *Historia Divae Monacellae*', *Montgomeryshire Collections Relating to Montgomeryshire and Its Borders*, 82 (1994), pp. 23–40.

The translation is derived from the complete manuscript held at the National Library of Wales,⁴ dating to the latter half of the seventeenth century and likely penned by Thomas Sebastian Price, an early modern antiquarian and popish recusant living in Llanfyllin (approximately 10 miles from Pennant Melangell).⁵ The *vita* is extremely short compared to other Celtic saint *vitae*, consisting of only two pages.⁶

Melangell Authorship and Dissemination

The authorship of this *vita* is a topic of debate, with no clear answer. It was likely written by somebody local to or familiar with Pennant Melangell due to several indicators. First, a passage mentioning “free tenants called abbots” who possess jurisdiction over those seeking sanctuary at Pennant Melangell likely reflects the situation at the site in the late medieval era, when lay abbots had the charge of church estates.⁷ Although this is not unique to the area, and probably occurred all over the country, when taken together with the use of geographical place names in the text, providing a name to Melangell’s Irish homeland not found elsewhere, and going against the lineage of Melangell as listed in the *Bonedd y Saint* – it is likely that the author had access to local sources.⁸

The text was written in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century and derived its material from sources that are now lost. However, there are indicators at Pennant Melangell church itself that the cult is much older than the age of the *vita* would suggest: an early 15th century female effigy which likely depicts Melangell, and a large rood screen dating to the late 15th century which depicts scenes from the legend of the saint (**figure 1**). There is also a Romanesque shrine to Melangell at the church dating back to

⁴ National Library of Wales, MS 3108B, pp 76 – 77.

⁵ Pryce, ‘A New Edition of the Historia Divae Monacellae’.

⁶ Discussed further in the comparison section further down.

⁷ Pryce, ‘A New Edition of the Historia Divae Monacellae’.

⁸ Pryce, ‘A New Edition of the Historia Divae Monacellae’.

the twelfth century (the oldest Romanesque shrine in Northern Europe) and would have been established for multiple hundreds of years at the time of the *vita* being written, yet is not mentioned. Going back even further, there is a theory that the presence of the hare in the story, an animal which has strong folklore imagery, indicates a prehistoric link with Melangell as the moon goddess which could theoretically place the story as ancient.⁹ Whether there were now-lost earlier versions of the story in manuscript format or whether the story was propagated through oral tradition (or indeed both) is unknown, however when taking the above examples along with the projected purpose of the text - it seems highly likely that this text is based on an older story which pre-dates the writing of the manuscript.

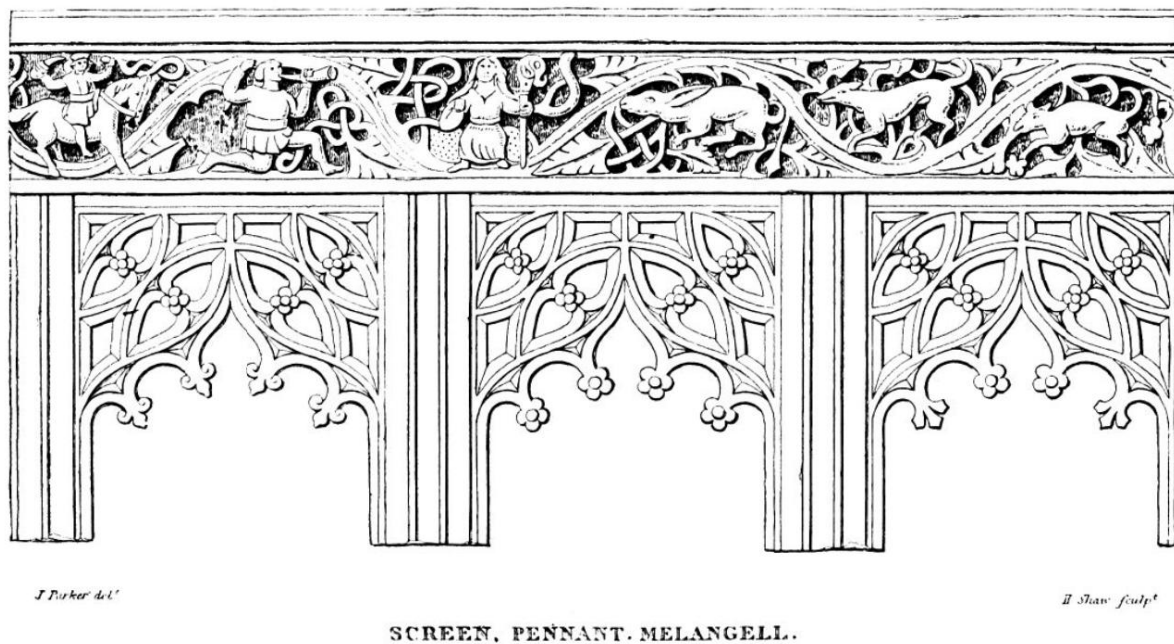


Figure 1: The 15th century rood screen at Pennant Melangell.¹⁰

⁹ Caroline Malim, 'As Above, So Below: St Melangell and the Celestial Journey', *Lands of the Shamans: Archaeology, Cosmology, and Landscape*, 2018
https://www.academia.edu/34397013/As_Above_So_Below_St_Melangell_and_the_Celestial_Journey

¹⁰ 'Archaeologia Cambrensis', XII (1848), pp. 224–28.

The purpose of the creation of the *vita* can only be speculated, but the strongest theory is that it was created to promote the idea of church as sanctuary. At least four examples can be seen in the text which emphasise and promote this idea: the protection of the hare by Melangell, the donation of land to form a sanctuary by the prince, the propagation of the purpose of the donation through subsequent generations of royals, and the punitive measures given to a man at the end of the story who attempts to violate the sanctuary. This is not a unique concept to this *vita* and can also be seen in several other *vitae* from the medieval era,¹¹ and was also defined in Welsh law in the thirteenth century, but given there is an explicit reference to “the officials of Powys” in the text and given how localised overall it is, it seems likely that the document was meant to reinforce the rights specifically of the church of Pennant Melangell (and maybe similar places in the surrounding area) in the wider context of law and religious belief. The idea of sanctuary is a biblical one with numerous examples: the six Cities of Refuge in the Book of Numbers providing sanctuary for those who commit accidental manslaughter,¹² and two examples specifically of the church providing sanctuary can be found the Book of Kings - with Adonijah successfully acquiring sanctuary at the Tabernacle of Moses,¹³ and Joab unsuccessfully attempting to acquire it at the same location¹⁴.

Synopsis

The *Historia Divae Monacellae* opens by describing a prince named Brochwel Ysgithrog on a hunting expedition in Pennant. His dogs spot a hare and give chase. The hare runs underneath a bramble bush and the hunting party follows – where they discover a woman described as “a certain virgin beautiful in appearance praying devoutly as

¹¹ Eg: Saint Dewi.

¹² Numbers 35:11–24

¹³ 1 Kings 1:50

¹⁴ 1 Kings 2

possible” – with the hare laid underneath the hem of her skirt for protection, looking out towards the dogs that had pursued it with no more fear. The prince urges the dogs to catch the hare, but the dogs back away, eventually fleeing and howling. The prince speaks to the woman and asks her how long she had been here. She tells him that she has been there fifteen years, never looking upon the face of a man during that time. She says that she is an Irish princess, daughter of Iowchel, and had fled Ireland in protest of an arranged marriage to an Irish nobleman – stating that she “came here to serve God and the spotless Virgin with my heart and a clean body”. The prince recognises her holiness and gifts her the very land they are standing on to found a “perpetual asylum” in her name.

She lives for another thirty-seven years and it is inferred she becomes the head of a monastery,¹⁵ where she recruits other women in the region to live a holy and chaste life. During this time, she is friends with the hares of the forest who are tame around her – and it is implied she uses them to perform miracles.¹⁶ After her death, a man named Elise comes to the monastery with the intention to attack and rape the women there, but “came to an end most wretchedly and perished suddenly”. After the death of Prince Brochwell, his son takes command and upholds his father’s decision that the area should be a holy sanctuary. This continues down the generations, as several subsequent leaders are listed and are shown to uphold the idea of the place being an area of sanctuary.

¹⁵ Not said directly but heavily implied. Indeed, the rood screen shows her holding a crozier which would denote her as an abbess.

¹⁶ It is ambiguous, but the line is “through whom, even with the assistance of divine clemency, miracles of different kinds are not lacking...”. Either the hares are performing miracles through her, or she is performing miracles through them. I truly wish we could hear more about this!

Saint Ninian

Saint Ninian (Latin: *Niniani*) is a male saint associated with the Lowlands area of Scotland, in particular Whithorn in modern day Dumfries and Galloway. He does not have any specific patronage, but is generally seen as Scotland's first Christian missionary, introducing Christianity to the Picts of the Scottish Lowlands. He was born on an unspecified date in the mid fourth century, and died c. AD 432.

There are three primary sources for his life. The earliest known mention of him is in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*,¹⁷ written c. 731 AD. The second source is an epyllion written by an unknown author, although likely by a monk at Whithorn Priory, at the end of the eighth century. The most substantial source is the *Vita Sancti Niniani*, a true *vita* written by Aelred of Rievaulx in the mid-twelfth century. It is on this *vita* that the discussions in this essay will be based, using the translation done by Winifred MacQueen in 2005.¹⁸

The *Vita Sancti Niniani* survives in two manuscripts: one held at the British Library dating from the end of the thirteenth century,¹⁹ and one held at the Bodleian Library dating from the end of the twelfth century.²⁰ It is unlikely that the Bodleian manuscript is Aelred's original manuscript and is more likely to be a contemporaneous scribal copy. Other versions of this manuscript may have existed but are now lost, one allegedly

¹⁷ Bede, 'Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England' (Project Gutenberg) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38326/38326-h/38326-h.html#noteref_302> [accessed 16 April 2025].

¹⁸ John MacQueen and Winifred MacQueen, *St Nynia* (Birlinn Limited, 2005) <<http://archive.org/details/stnynia0000macq>>.

¹⁹ British Library Cotton Tiberius D iii. Unfortunately due to the cyber attack at the British Library, this collection is not online for general viewing and therefore I cannot be certain of the folio numbering.

²⁰ Bodleian Library Laud Misc. 668, ff. 78 – 89.

owned by Roodklooster Abbey in Brussels,²¹ and another by a Carthusian charterhouse in Cologne.²²

Ninian Authorship and Dissemination

Vita Sancti Niniani was likely commissioned by the Bishop of Whithorn to promote and to legitimise his bishopric, which at the time of the *vita*'s commission had just entered its third iteration.²³ The first bishopric was exclusively linked to Ninian, with no extant primary sources regarding history or succession. There is, however, contemporaneous evidence of Christianity in the area in the form of the Latinus stone,²⁴ praising God and bearing the Chi Rho (☩) – an early Christogram – indicating some precedence for the bishopric's real existence. The second bishopric was set up following Northumbrian annexation of the area, starting in AD 730 with the appointment of Bishop Pecthelm and lasting until around AD 836 when records of succession stop.²⁵ It was once thought that the bishopric was vacant for almost three hundred years, however some surviving correspondence from the bishop-elect, Gille-Aldan, in AD 1125 speaks about the reform of the bishopric; requesting the restoration of the Archbishop of York as the rightful metropolitan.²⁶ This implies that the bishopric did continue for the three hundred years that we do not have surviving information for, but perhaps that following the Viking raids it was converted to following the church of the Western Isles – ultimately under

²¹ Alternatively "Rouge Cloître Abbey" in French, or *Rubaeæ Vallis* in Latin.

²² A. P. Forbes, *Lives of S. Ninian and S. Kentigern. Compiled in the Twelfth Century* (Edmonston and Douglas, 1874) <<http://archive.org/details/livesofsniniansk00forbrich>>.

²³ Daphne Brooke, *Wild Men and Holy Places : St. Ninian, Whithorn and the Medieval Realm of Galloway* (Edinburgh : Canongate Press, 1994) <<http://archive.org/details/wildmenholypplace0000broo>>.

²⁴ 'Memorial - The Latinus Stone; 5th Century; Early Medieval; Whithorn Priory Museum' <<https://www.historicenvironment.scot/archives-and-research/archives-and-collections/properties-in-care-collections/object/memorial-the-latinus-stone-5th-century-early-medieval-whithorn-priory-museum-9680>> [accessed 18 April 2025].

²⁵ Brooke, *Wild Men and Holy Places*.

²⁶ Brooke, *Wild Men and Holy Places*.

the role of Norway. We can view this correspondence as the start of the third iteration of the bishopric, one that would be seen as returning to form by means of making a new start. It is unclear whether King David I of Scotland, during his sweeping Scoto-Norman ecclesiastical reforms, was the one who instigated the revival of the See, or whether it was Fergus, Lord of Galloway – with whom David had a rivalry.²⁷

Regardless of who initiated the revival, Aelred of Rievaulx – a Cistercian monk – was commissioned by the first or second Bishop of Galloway to write the *Vita Sancti Niniani*. Aelred was well known to both David and Fergus, having served as the head steward at David's court for almost a decade prior to becoming a monk,²⁸ and had assisted with a dispute between Fergus and his sons before convincing Fergus to retire to Holyrood.²⁹ Because of his connection to the two leaders, it seems likely that he would oblige the request to help either ruler (via the request from the bishop) – making the issue of who revived the see a moot one in the context of this discussion.

The *vita* was likely written to promote the refreshed diocese; to show that the area of Galloway had the precedence of a powerful saint behind it, one that had learnt directly from the teachings of the pope and had achieved conversion of the Picts. Parallels from the story of Pict conversion can be applied to the contentious real-life status of Galloway and the Western Isles, under Norse rule, for which this new bishopric was separating itself from. The *vita* legitimises the diocese and gives it the gravitas it needs to attract pilgrims and build up its status. Indeed, by the late medieval era it was one of the most

²⁷ Richard D. Oram, 'The Lordship of Galloway, C. 1000 to C. 1250' (PhD Thesis, University of St. Andrews, 1989).

²⁸ Richard Oram, *David I: The King Who Made Scotland* (The History Press, 2008).

²⁹ This is taken from Aelred's own *Vita Aelredi* written by his friend almost immediately after he died.

popular sites of pilgrimage in Scotland, with many royal visitors including King Robert I (aka Robert the Bruce) seeking healing shortly before his death.³⁰

Aelred states that he used Bede's work as a source for his *vita*, but he also mentions using another work in a "barbarous style" which he aimed to "bring into the light of Latin prose". This "barbarous" work is now lost but is thought to have been written in early English due to Aelred mentioning an Anglo-Saxon place name, "Farres Last", thought to have been somewhere near Whithorn.³¹ Although this is a debated theory and other scholars believe the lost work to be in Latin,³² an early English *vita* would perhaps imply that the early medieval cult had spread into England and necessitated an English translation.

Synopsis

Ninian was born in modern-day Scotland, possibly on the Machars Peninsula,³³ and was the son of an unnamed Christian king. He is said to be pious from an early age and is not corrupted by "things contrary to his religion". He was taught Christian doctrine by "certain skilled men of his own race" but began to develop doubts over the authenticity of their teachings. He eventually travels to Rome, where he learns 'true' Christianity directly from teachers appointed directly by the pope – who confirmed to him that he had been taught ideology that was 'opposed to sound doctrine' in Scotland. He took to his studies and spent several years in Rome, eventually "reach(ing) the height of virtue".

³⁰ Peter Yeoman, *Pilgrimage in Medieval Scotland* (B. T. Batsford / Historic Scotland, 1999).

³¹ John MacQueen, 'The Literary Sources for the Life of Saint Ninian', *Scottish Society for Northern Studies*, Galloway: Land and Lordship (1991), pp. 17–26.

³² James E. Fraser, 'Northumbrian Whithorn and the Making of St Ninian', *The Innes Review*, 53.1 (2002), pp. 40–59, doi:10.3366/inr.2002.53.1.40.

³³ Extrapolated from description in the text: "in the Western part of the island where the ocean stretches out an arm and forms two sides of a triangle". This fits with the Machars Peninsula of southern Scotland, and as it is where Whithorn is also located it does seem to fit.

The pope asks Ninian to return to his homeland and to spread his newly-learnt teachings, both to correct what had been believed by his former teachers and to spread the belief to non-followers. On the way back to Scotland, Ninian takes a detour to Tours, France, where he meets Bishop Martin of Tours (later Saint Martin) at his abbey.³⁴ Ninian is so impressed with the abbey that he asks Martin if he can take the stonemasons who built it to Scotland with him to build a church there that imitates the building style of the Holy Roman Church. Martin grants his request, and Ninian leaves France for Scotland.

Upon his return, he immediately begins to spread the doctrine of Christianity amongst his community. He founds the See of Whithorn and begins work on building his church in the town which he dedicates to Saint Martin whom has recently died.³⁵ Ninian begins to perform miracles within his community (see **Appendix 1**) and eventually converts a large number of southern Picts to Christianity through both performance of miracles and by teaching doctrine. After this, Ninian becomes a formal teacher of holy scripture to the sons of noblemen and freemen, ensuring his teaching will be passed on after he dies.

He eventually has a vision of his own death and dies shortly afterwards. He is venerated further post-mortem and continues to perform curative miracles at the site of his tomb.

Comparing the *Vitae* of Melangell and Ninian

General

³⁴ Presumably at Marmoutier Abbey just outside Tours which was founded by Martin c. 372.

³⁵ Although not mentioned in this text, the church does become known as “*Candida Casa*” (lit: “White House”) presumably on account of its white stone or the whitewashing of the stone.

The immediate difference between the two *vitae* is the length. Melangell's *vita* is short, totalling two pages; Ninian's *vita* is around twenty-two pages. This is unlikely to be because of the gender of the saints, as we see much longer texts than Melangell's for other female Celtic saints (eg: Gwenffrewi, Brigid) and shorter than Ninian's for other male Celtic saints (eg: Deiniol, Oudoceus). The reason for the length of these two documents is likely more to do with the purpose. Ninian's *vita* must promote and legitimise a refreshed diocese against a background of international politics, and is therefore filled with miracles, allegory, and the promotion of Cistercian values. Comparatively, Melangell's *vita* promotes the idea of church as sanctuary and contains explicit examples of how this is achieved and propagated. It seems likely that the audiences were different too; with Melangell's *vita* perhaps having its primary dissemination only in the geographical area it was written, and Ninian's *vita* perhaps having some international reach. The purposes, commissions, and audience demographics are different, and this is reflected in the length of each document.

The amount of research conducted into both *vitae* is also notable. Academic research articles, books, etc on Ninian far outweigh those of Melangell. This is also reflected in the modern dissemination of each saint; Ninian has multiple institutions named after him (especially in Scotland) and has many stained glass depictions (**figure 2** shows an example), whereas Melangell has almost none outside of her church in Pennant Melangell.³⁶ This is likely to do, again, with both the length and purpose of *vitae* rather than the gender, as both Gwenffrewi and Brigid for example have many institutions and

³⁶ There is an orthodox church bearing her name in Manchester, England, but besides that I cannot find much else. However, I will later discuss alternative places where she has found popularity.

depictions both inside and outside their respective homelands and have substantially more academic research conducted into them.



Figure 2 Stained glass depicting Saint Ninian from St Ninian's Priory in Whithorn, Scotland.³⁷

Motifs and Themes

Using the list of motifs established by Alwyn Rees,³⁸ themselves based upon a list of motifs appearing in European and Asian hero tales created by Lord Raglan,³⁹ and also those established by Dorothy Bray,⁴⁰ it is clear that both *vitae* draw from hagiographical convention.

³⁷ Taken from the St Ninian's Priory Facebook page, originally posted 23rd April 2024.

³⁸ Alwyn D. Rees, *The Divine Hero in Celtic Hagiology* <<http://archive.org/details/rees-1936-celtic-divine-hero>> [accessed 21 April 2025].

³⁹ Lord Raglan, 'The Hero of Tradition', *Folklore*, 45.3 (1934), pp. 212–31.

⁴⁰ I am unable to directly access the article in which Bray lists motifs, however I used the slide set from the lectures instead.

The *vitae* share some motifs from both Rees and Bray: both are children of royal leaders (both leaders only mentioned in passing), both found churches/monasteries, both are portrayed as protectors, both curse their enemies,⁴¹ both saints pass away, and miracles continue to occur after their deaths. However, due to the length and purpose of Ninian's *vita*, he has substantially more motifs that are not present in Melangell's, frequently exhibiting more examples of motifs from both lists. Notably, there is little adversity in Melangell's story (with the exceptions of the dogs and the attack on the monastery by Elise) compared to Ninian's, who battles against Picts and a corrupt king and hits several motifs whilst doing so (missionary career, victory over a chieftain, contending with secular rulers, amongst others).

Ninian's conversion of the Picts is a particularly interesting example of the motifs proposed by Rees ("victory over a chieftain; supreme power of the land") and Brae ("saint as giver of victory"). This event occurs in chapter 6 of his *vita*, when he is back in Scotland after visiting Rome and Tours, and is filled with war imagery. It speaks of Ninian donning "the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of love, and the sword of the spirit" and compares his arrival into the Pict territory as that of an invasion into enemy territory. However, he wins them over by displaying numerous examples of curative miracles and not through violence, despite the imagery portrayed, and the Picts are quickly converted to Christianity in a rather anti-climatic manner. The use of warlike imagery provides a setup that implies a huge battle is going to take place, but Ninian is so holy that the Picts are immediately won over – showing just how influential and powerful Ninian is after his experiences on the continent. This text is also probably

⁴¹ Implied with Melangell at least, at the end of the *vita*.

promoting Cistercian values, by showing Ninian as a reformatory power in the region winning over the “old” religions, comparable to the recent refreshment of the diocese.

Both saints also have variations on the motifs. For example, Bray has “animal leads to a site of monastery” listed as a motif, and whilst this does not explicitly happen in either story, in Melangell’s it could be argued that the hare is the catalyst for the bequeathing of land she receives to build her monastery. In a similar vein, Ninian does revive a man from death as per Bray’s resuscitation motif, but is actually the one who kills the man initially. He also miraculously produces leeks and herbs in the barren garden, but in a state where they are setting seed so that propagation of the miracle can continue without his assistance. Such variations provide nuance to the texts to ensure they are not identical to that of other saints (whilst still following hagiographical convention), and also allow for the author to insert creative licence and perhaps local flavour.

Settings and Environment

Melangell’s *vita* takes place entirely in forest, which she made her home after sailing from Ireland. The forest is portrayed as so remote that she does not look upon the face of a man for fifteen years,⁴² and is likely a parable to the Desert Mothers and Fathers – Christian ascetics living in monastic communities in the deserts of the Middle East. The dense forest is analogous to the desert due to its similar characteristics of wilderness but provides a more familiar and relateable backdrop to Welsh readers. When discovered by Brochwel Ysgithrog, she is found in the middle of a bramble bush. The explicit use of the bramble bush reinforces the idea of wilderness, as seen in Isaiah’s

⁴² Although the explicit use of the term man does open it up to interpretation; did she see other women in the forest or simply no other people at all? This event also reinforces her chastity/virginity as discussed later in this essay.

prophecy against Edom,⁴³ where brambles and nettles grow in the abandoned citadels to portray the desolation of the land. The spines of the bramble could also be a natural world metaphor for the cilice, a garment designed to irritate the skin as an instrument of penance and chastity, as Melangell is discovered praying inside the bush which undoubtedly was not comfortable.

Ninian's *vita* takes place in a variety of locations, primarily Whithorn in southern Scotland but also Rome, Tours, in the middle of the Irish sea, and potentially Eastern Scotland into Pict territory.⁴⁴ These locations correspond with one of Rees' motifs – "saint set out on a missionary career". Although there is no obvious parallel with environment/setting and biblical imagery as with Melangell (with the possible exception of the Irish Sea being used again as a desert analogy), the settings in this *vita* serve a different purpose. Ninian travels to Rome to learn "true" Christianity, stays there for several years, and stops in Tours on the way home – an important metropolis during the time of the story, and a position on the important pilgrim route to Santiago de Compostela at the time of commission⁴⁵ – to meet Saint Martin. In doing so, Ninian is portrayed as someone with extensive knowledge of the Christian religion, with backing from the pope, and has associated himself with an important saint in Tours, which was an holy place to contemporary readers. The setting therefore is used to reinforce Ninian's suitability for becoming a saint.

⁴³ Isaiah 34:13

⁴⁴ The geographical territory of the Picts is open to some interpretation and is not a static state, however during the time that Ninian's story takes place there are seven defined Kingdoms of the Picts and none of them are near Whithorn, implying some travel must take place.

⁴⁵ Giving it gravitas; promoting St Martin's Church (inadvertently or not) and reinforcing the friendship between Ninian and Martin.

Virginity, Chastity, and Sexuality

An important theme in hagiographical work is the promotion of chastity (sexually pure behaviour; the lack of, or removal of, sexual thoughts and urges – a sort of spiritual virginity) and virginity (a status conferred and maintained by never once engaging in physical sexual intercourse). It is important to separate the two, because it is possible to have an unchaste virgin or a chaste non-virgin. In the context of hagiography, chastity is often portrayed as a virtue upheld by both male and female saints alike, albeit in different ways, whereas virginity is a virtue exclusively applied to female saints. That is not to say that the male saints engage in sexual activity – but rhetorically it seems that virginity is a status conferred only upon women, whereas men who have never engaged in sexual activity – whilst technically virgins in the literal sense of the term – do not have this status conferred upon them by hagiographers.⁴⁶ Put simply, in hagiography, to be a virgin is to be a woman.

Melangel's chastity and virginity are presented entirely differently to how Ninian's same qualities are depicted. She is described as having fled from an arranged marriage in Ireland, guided by God across the sea, so that she may "serve God and the spotless Virgin with my heart and a clean body for as long as I remain". Indeed, the first descriptor we get of her physicality is 'virgin':⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Katherine DeCoste, "The Heavenly Light": Representing Female Virginity in Medieval Celtic Hagiography', *Constellations*, 11.2 (2020)
<<https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/constellations/index.php/constellations/issue/view/1946>>.

⁴⁷ Emphasis in the following quote is my own and not part of the text.

“..in that bramble bush indeed he found a certain **virgin** beautiful in appearance praying as devoutly as possible..”⁴⁸

Her fleeing from an arranged marriage gives agency; she is rejecting patriarchal expectations of marriage and has independently fled the country, guided by God, which provides justification for the act to the reader; she has taken the decision herself to become a Bride of Christ, rather than of man. In doing so, she takes control of her own body and her own spirituality; this act is a form of chastity instigated by her. However, this is also all we know of her early life; she is presumably of an age to be married, but we know nothing of her childhood or adolescence. This is a common theme in the lives of female saints (eg: Gwenffrewi, Taneu), whereas male saints (including Ninian) typically have their childhood and education described in detail.

However, this first description of her is from a male character’s perspective, written by (almost certainly) a male writer, and her physicality has taken on a shorthand symbolism of purity for others to see, rather than for herself – which detracts from her agency. It is also stated that she lived in Wales for fifteen years without ever seeing a man until she encountered the prince, perhaps again for the purposes of emphasising her virginal status. She never explicitly refers to herself as a virgin but does state that she serves God with “a clean body”; the term virgin is always a descriptor applied to her by the male narrator and character. When granted the land by the prince, she recruits other ‘virgins’ from the area to live ‘holily and chastely’. After her death, a man called Elise attempts to physically and sexually attack the women who live at Pennant Melangell and is killed⁴⁹ – emphasising both the purpose of the text (sanctuary) and also

⁴⁸ Pryce, ‘A New Edition of the Historia Divae Monacellae’.

⁴⁹ Presumably by Melangell herself as an example of a punitive miracle, although the details are not described

the importance of female virginity and how holy a concept it is; it is a lesson that anyone who attempts to attack consecrated virgins will be punished.⁵⁰ We see a similar theme of holy women protecting other virgins in other works, for example the female Irish saint Samthann, who punishes a monk trying to seduce a virgin by causing a giant eel to wrap itself around his waist and bite him on the genitals, remaining there until he begs for forgiveness.⁵¹

Melangell's story is somewhat atypical in hagiography in that, although there is a constant focus on her virginity and chasteness, she does not suffer any sort of violence for it. Gwenfrewy, for example, is decapitated by a man for spurning his advances,⁵² and Taneu is drugged and raped before suffering further punishment at the hands of her own father.⁵³ In comparison, the man that Melangell meets immediately recognises her sanctity and rewards her for it; she does not suffer any abuse or humiliation.

Ninian, as with all male saints, does not have such descriptors of virginity applied to him. However, chapter nine does describe him struggling with his own chastity – and potentially even his own sexuality – in a way that Melangell does not. It describes a scene where Ninian and one of his monks, Plebia, were travelling together and turned off the road to have a short rest. They began to read their Psalm books when a heavy rainstorm started around them. Their holiness shielded them from the water by forming a bubble of impenetrable air, and they carried on reading their books undisturbed. At one point, Ninian raises his eyes from the book and “was distracted by an unlawful

⁵⁰ Jane Cartwright, ‘Dead Virgins: Feminine Sanctity in Medieval Wales’, *Medium Ævum*, 71.1 (2002), pp. 1–28, doi:10.2307/43630386.

⁵¹ Dorothy Africa, ‘Life of the Holy Virgin Samthann’, in *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology* (Garland Publishing, 2000).

⁵² Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss, *Two Mediaeval Lives of Saint Winifrede* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000).

⁵³ Cynthia Whiddon Green, ‘Jocelyn, a Monk of Furness: The Life of Kentigern (Mungo)’, 1998 <<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/Jocelyn-LifeofKentigern.asp>>.

thought” and was “even titivated by some desire at the suggestion of the devil”. At this thought, rain began to fall through the bubble and began to wet the book. Plebia, who was sitting beside him, realised what was happening and “reminded him of his order and his age, and showed how unbecoming such behaviour was to such a man”. Ninian immediately stops, blushing because he “had been overcome by an unprofitable thought”. He puts aside the thought and the rain stops. We can see this as an example that even the saints are fallible, but that they can overcome any mental or physical challenge to bring themselves back to a pious state. The purpose of this is probably to provide an example for behaviour to those who read it; it acknowledges that to err is human, but to overcome it is saintly. It is a common theme in male Celtic saint hagiographies to take direct action to sustain their chastity – such as Saint Kentigern of Glasgow, who bathes nude in cold water every day to stop impure thoughts,⁵⁴ seemingly implying these thoughts are normal to have but take effort and willingness to remove.

In the same chapter, it is perhaps implied that St Ninian was experiencing homosexual desire. The feeling of (presumably) lust that Ninian experiences only begins when he looks up from his book – potentially at his male travelling partner. The thought is described as “unlawful”, “...at the suggestion of the Devil”, and “unprofitable”. Although the first two could be seen as contrary to the Order (bearing in mind this was written by a Cistercian monk to promote, to some extent, the order), rather than contrary to societal expectation/law, the use of the term ‘unprofitable’ implies that the carrying out of a homosexual act would not be ‘profitable’, ie: it would not lead to procreation.⁵⁵

Furthermore, the hagiographer Aelred is generally accepted to have been a homosexual

⁵⁴ Whiddon Green, ‘Jocelyn, a Monk of Furness: The Life of Kentigern (Mungo)’.

⁵⁵ This is my own interpretation and it is entirely possible that I am missing some biblical context, but it seems overtly like homosexuality to me.

man who likely did engage in sexual activity with other men prior to becoming a monk,⁵⁶ and may have inserted this into the story as a projection of his own feelings – consciously or not - further lending some credence to the theory and perhaps providing an area of future investigation. Although such examples are rare, we do see references to homosexuality or homosexual acts in other Celtic hagiographies, such as in Rhygyfarch's Life of St David where the unnamed wife of Baia, an Irish "warlord and seer", sends her maids to seduce David's followers by "imitating sexual intercourse" amongst other things.⁵⁷ However, these characters are the agents of "otherness" in the story (non-Christian antagonists) and therefore by the rules of hagiography do not need to maintain their chastity and virginity; they are comparator characters for the saint.

The challenges presented against Ninian's chastity and potentially sexuality are likely present to provide moral guidance to those who read it; perhaps identifying with the same issues in their personal lives and providing them with an example to follow. The same challenges are not present in Melangell's story because the main purpose of her *vita* is not to provide the same guidance; Melangell needs to be a saintly figure to provide a strong figurehead for the role of local church as sanctuary, but she does not need to provide moral guidance outside of this. However, the emphasis on her virginity is still present, indicating at least that there is still a precedence for how a female saintly figure should appear.

Modern Propagation

⁵⁶ John Boswell, 'Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality' (The University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 221–26.

⁵⁷ 'Rhygyfarch's Life of St David', in *St David of Wales: Cult, Church and Nation*, ed. by Richard Sharpe and others (Boydell & Brewer, 2007), xxiv, pp. 107–55 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt81m2d.12>>.

Ninian and Melangell's cults survive into the modern day, but in very different forms. Ninian has numerous modern institutions named after him, ranging from his depiction on the coat of arms for the United Diocese of Glasgow and Galloway led by the Scottish Episcopal Church, to having numerous schools named after him across Scotland. Whithorn remains an important site of pilgrimage, with a 146-mile walking route established between the town and Glasgow.⁵⁸ He is seen as the oldest Scottish saint and there have been small efforts in recent years to raise his profile somewhat. Melangell, however, has found a less traditional form of propagation in the form of online reverence. Her story and imagery is now associated strongly with rabbits as well as hares, and there are numerous pet and pop culture websites which either tell her story or sell merchandise with her imagery,⁵⁹ and seems to be particularly associated with young women.⁶⁰ Her church at Pennant Melangell is unusual in that it no longer has a regular congregation, but serves primarily as a site of pilgrimage and of historical interest.⁶¹ In my own experience visiting Pennant Melangell, I saw numerous prayer cards asking for her protection of pets as well as humans – strongly indicating to me that her legend is being propagated with her seen as the protector of small animals, rather than her being a symbol for sanctuary. Indeed, unfortunately, the area can no longer really be described as a sanctuary (for animals, at least) as it is in the middle of a shooting estate.⁶²

⁵⁸ Walk the Whithorn Way, 'Walk the Whithorn Way', *Walk the Whithorn Way*. <<https://walkthewhithornway.org/>> [accessed 27 April 2025].

⁵⁹ For example: <https://rabbitretail.co.uk/blogs/news/melangell-saint-of-hares-and-rabbits>

⁶⁰ Extrapolated from viewing the profiles of sellers selling Melangell merchandise and writing articles on her rabbit and hare protection.

⁶¹ 'The Shrine Church of Saint Melangell' <<https://stmelangell.org/the-shrine-church-of-saint-melangell/>> [accessed 27 April 2025].

⁶² Jim Perrin, 'Country Diary: No Sanctuary for Hunted Partridge at Melangell's Church', *The Guardian*, 14 July 2018, section UK news <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jul/14/country-diary-no-sanctuary-hunted-partridge-melangells-church-llangynog-powys>>.

Conclusion

The vitae examined in this essay are clearly following hagiographical convention, but for their own purposes and with their own flavouring to differentiate them from other saints. There are notable differences between the two stories and some of them can be attributed to their gender, particularly around the topic of virginity and chastity. Each text works well for its intended purpose at the time of writing, which is reflected in the actions of the saints as well; Ninian learns from the church in Rome, performs miracles, and converts Picts to Christianity - whereas Melangell has only two miracles as it is not important to the overall purpose of her story. Both saints have a sentence which summarises their later miracles to emphasise their holiness, but even then Melangell's sentence compared to Ninian's is ambiguous and non-specific. Both saints continue to receive reverence today, but largely in modern secular manners – proof that their stories still resonate with people today.

Appendix 1: the miracles of Ninian and Melangell and their allusions

Miracles depicted in <i>Vita Sancti Niniani</i> and <i>Historia Divae Monacellae</i>	Allusions (Biblical and Hagiographical)
Ninian heals a man of blindness and he converts to Christianity	John 9:1-12 Matthew 9:27-31 Numerous examples in hagiography including Dewi.
Ninian gives a newborn baby the ability to talk in order to confirm his paternity	No direct biblical allegory, but precedence for a talking baby at the time of Aelred's writing with the <i>Vita Sancti Rumwoldi</i> being written a century before, telling the story of a pious baby in England who could talk from birth and lived only for three days. ⁶³ A version of the miracle can also be read in <i>vitae</i> of Saint Anthony.
Ninian produces leeks and herbs in the barren monastic garden	Numerous food-based miracles in the bible, including Matthew 14:13-21 and Mark 8:1-9. Numerous examples in Celtic hagiography, including Kentigern and Brigid

⁶³ 'St Rumbold of Buckingham', *University of Buckingham*
<<https://www.buckingham.ac.uk/about/history/rumbold/>> [accessed 27 April 2025].

Ninian raises the dead	Numerous examples in the bible, notably the story of Lazarus in John 11:1-44. Numerous examples in hagiography, including Kentigern, Dewi, Patrick.
Ninian protects himself and another monk from the rain with a “magic” wall	No direct biblical allegory, as most of the stories of rain in the bible pertain to physical structures providing protection. However, similar waterproofing miracles can also be seen in the <i>vitae</i> of Kentigern and Columba amongst others.
Ninian’s staff turns into a tree with a healing spring	Likely a direct allegory to the staffs of Moses (in Exodus) and Aaron (Numbers, Exodus). Staff turning into a tree can also be seen in the story of St Noyale and a variant can be seen in the story of St Brigid. Healing spring creation is an extremely common miracle and can be seen in many <i>vitae</i>, including notably Gwenffrewi.
Ninian performs numerous curative miracles post-mortem	Numerous examples in hagiography.
Melangell protects a hare from dogs	Examples of sanctuary can be found in: Numbers 35:11–24 1 Kings 1:50 1 Kings 2

Melangell performs punitive miracle post-mortem	Seen also in Kentigern amongst others.
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Note:

Cover page image taken by me at Pennant Melangell on March 4th 2025.