

## THE LITERARY SOURCES FOR THE LIFE OF ST NINIAN

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There are three major documentary sources for St Ninian. One, which will be referred to as HE, is the first paragraph of Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* III.iv., written, as seems likely, in 731.<sup>1</sup> Second (MNE) is the *Miracula Nynie Episcopi*,<sup>2</sup> a poem composed by a monk at Whithorn towards the end of the eighth century, and some fifty years later than Bede. Third (VN) is the *Vita Niniani*<sup>3</sup> by Ailred of Rievaulx, probably composed between 1154 and 1160 (Ailred died in 1166).

As has long been realised, there is a particularly close relationship between MNE and VN. MNE is the religious epyllion composed in Latin heroic (hexameter) verse, as were many other important saints' *Lives* during the eighth and ninth centuries. Examples that come readily to mind include Bede's metrical *Life* of St Cuthbert, written before 705, Alcuin's metrical *Life* of St Willibrord (c. 785-797), Milo of St Amand's *Life* of Amandus, completed between 845 and 855, and Heiric of Auxerre's *Life* of St Germanus of Auxerre, completed in 877.<sup>4</sup> Each of these poems has as its source an earlier prose narrative — for Bede, the anonymous *Life* of St Cuthbert, for Alcuin, his own prose *Life* of Willibrord, for Milo, his own prose narrative, for Heiric, the much earlier (c. 480) *Life* of Germanus by Constantius.<sup>5</sup> It is probable that MNE is also based on a prose source, no longer extant, which may be called \*PV. At several points MNE can be understood only if one makes a comparison with VN, a fact which presumably indicates that both are ultimately based on \*PV, which Ailred's prose version reproduces with more precision of detail than does the compressed and often allusive verse of MNE.

The existence in both of a series of posthumous miracles associated with the distinctively Anglo-Saxon personal names shows that at least some of the material had its origins in the period of the Anglian bishopric at Whithorn, which had just been established when Bede completed his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, but as there is nothing similar in the actual life-story as related in either work, there is a suggestion that this part at least antedates the Anglian supremacy.

It should be added that there is evidence<sup>6</sup> to suggest that VN was based, not directly on \*PV, but on an intermediate lost Anglo-Saxon translation (\*ASV), one phrase (*Farres Last*) of which Ailred preserves in his chapter VIII.

How is HE related to this? Bede's knowledge of Ninian is likely to be derived from his friend Pecthelm, first Anglian bishop of Candida Casa, who died in 735.<sup>7</sup> Pecthelm is acknowledged by Bede as the source of two anecdotes in *Historia Ecclesiastica*: one (V.xiii.) is the story of the Mercian who on his deathbed was shown by an angel the slender volume which

recorded his good acts, and by a demon the massive record of his evil acts; the other (V.xviii.) is the story of the miraculous cures effected at the tomb of Haedde, the saintly bishop of the West Saxons who died in 705. Pecthelm's recent election to the see of Candida Casa is recorded in *Historia Ecclesiastica* V.xxiii., but he is there described as *first* bishop of the see, a remark earlier contradicted by HE. Bede, I suggest, knew nothing of the history of Candida Casa when he recorded the election; shortly afterwards Pecthelm or an intermediary gave him more information, which he then incorporated in his text at III.iv., without however making any correction at v.xxiii.. This may result from nothing more than a lapse of memory. HE certainly gives the appearance of having been inserted into a chapter dealing primarily with Columba, which itself, as Plummer noted,<sup>8</sup> is not included in the *capitula*, or in the late Anglo-Saxon translation, and thus may well be a later interpolation. The decision to include some account of Columba was itself possibly a late one — Columba, after all, had nothing directly to do with the history of the English church and people — and the decision to include Ninian later still. Pecthelm is the most likely source of information. He must have gained this in turn from traditions, or more probably a document, preserved at Whithorn, a document which basically, I suggest, was \*PV, the existence of which has already been postulated. As against this, it has commonly been said that there is nothing factual, or apparently factual, in MNE and VN which is not also in HE, with the implication that HE is therefore the source of both. Certainly HE compresses a surprisingly high factual content into very few words. There are ten main items:-

- (i) Ninian's *floruit* was long before Columba's arrival in Iona.
- (ii) He converted the Southern Picts.
- (iii) He was a reverent bishop and a holy man (i.e. monk) of the nation of the Britons.
- (iv) He was regularly instructed at Rome.
- (v) His monastic episcopal seat included a church named for Martin of Tours (ob. 397).
- (vi) This contained the relics of St Ninian and of many other saints.
- (vii) An Anglican bishop had recently been appointed to the see.
- (viii) The church was now in the province of the Bernicians.
- (ix) It was called in the vernacular The White House.
- (x) The explanation of the name is that it was built of stone in a manner to which the Britons were not accustomed.

MNE and VN, however, contain additional, apparently factual statements:

- (i) Ninian visited St Martin on his way home from Rome (VN).
- (ii) Martin provided masons for the building of Candida Casa (VN).
- (iii) The Picts converted by Ninian were called Niduari (MNE).
- (iv) Ninian had dealings with a king called Tuduael, Thuuahel, Tuduwallus.

- (v) A place called Farres Last was somewhere in the vicinity of Whithorn. (VN).
- (vi) Ninian was accustomed to make use of a cave (MNE).
- (vii) A name Plebia occurs in connection with Ninian (VN).
- (viii) Stories of posthumous miracles include four Anglo-Saxon personal names — Pethgils, Plecgils (MNE), Adefridus, Desuit (VN).

The possible significance of this additional material has been discussed elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> In addition, MNE suggests that the Pope of Ninian's visit to Rome was called Clement,<sup>10</sup> or had a particularly close relationship to Pope Clement. The latter was commonly but erroneously regarded as St Peter's immediate successor, and if the reference is to him, it shows merely that the author of MNE had no idea of Ninian's historical period. On the other hand, Siricius, who was Pope from 384 to 399, built San Clemente, an important church in Rome, on a site which was believed to have connections with his predecessor.<sup>11</sup> It is just possible that a reference to Siricius is intended.

Despite this, most writers (including myself) have tended to concentrate on HE, not least because MNE and VN contain much fabulous material in the shape of miracle stories, none of which is to be found in HE. MNE includes four attributed to the lifetime of the saint; VN adds two others. MNE and VN each has in addition four posthumous miracles, three of which correspond in both works, but the fourth differs. It is generally assumed, at least implicitly, that these miracle stories are subsequent additions to the straightforward factual account of HE. For several reasons, this is unlikely.

(1) A general characteristic of the early hagiographical tradition in the Western as in the Eastern church is the emphasis placed by it on the miraculous.

The *Life of Martin* by Sulpicius Severus (c. 363-c. 420/5), written during the lifetime of the saint by one of his immediate followers, and Constantius' *Life of Germanus*, already mentioned,<sup>12</sup> are striking and influential examples. Both appear to have been well-known in Britain. The performance of miracles formed a necessary part of a saint's *dossier*. It is extremely unlikely that any account of a much earlier monastic luminary would have come down to Bede unaccompanied by miracle stories.

(2) In historical work, Bede's general habit is to include miracle stories only when they are sanctioned by a tradition still powerful in his own time, or by the eye-witnesses with whom he has some kind of personal acquaintance. The frequency with which miracle stories are included in *Historia Ecclesiastica* actually increases as Bede moves towards his own present. It is not likely that he would have included specimens dating from a remote period, and originating in a community with which he was personally unfamiliar.



this despite the fact that he was a Cistercian, and that a very similar miracle, derived possibly from Paschasius or even MNE, twice appears (chapters 14 and 15), and is given great emphasis, in the Cistercian *Queste del Saint Graal*,<sup>16</sup> a prose romance or spiritual fable written about 1225.

Third is the fact that VN contains two lifetime miracles not present in MNE. One is the story of the *illicita cogitatio*, the sinful thought which momentarily destroyed the spiritual umbrella protecting Ninian and his psalter from the rain. The emphasis on the book as part of the story suggests that the narrative was originally linked to a supposed relic of the saint — a psalter which showed traces of exposure to the elements. If this is so, the story is likely to be early. The second is the record of the miracles of the staff of St Ninian in the sea and on land, the details of which more resemble sensational romantic fiction than anything in the other miracle stories.

Both stories may simply be later additions to the original *Life*. More probably, as I see it, they fall outside the scheme set for himself by the author of the MNE. As has been mentioned, his primary concern was with the miracles performed by the saint. The *illicita cogitatio*, however, illustrates not so much the exercise of spiritual power as a failure on the part of St Ninian. At least to the superficial reader, the second story illustrates the power resident in the saint's crozier rather than in his person. The crozier makes an early appearance in VN's version of the story of the bull and the thieves, the version of which in the MNE to a degree lacks point simply because the miracle-working staff makes no appearance. There are hints that it has been suppressed by the author.

An alternative possibility should also be noted. MNE is written in the complex literary tradition of the Latin saint's *Life* in metrical form, seen at its most advanced in Heiric's *Life of Germanus*, which has already been mentioned in the course of this essay. Numerological structure is one feature of the tradition. Elsewhere,<sup>17</sup> I have attempted an analysis of Heiric's use of the Hexad, the number 6. Similar features are also to be found in the prose tradition as may be illustrated by the tenth century *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, but it also appears in works written at a much earlier date. In Bede's prose *Life of St Cuthbert*<sup>18</sup> (c.720), for instance, the life, death and entombment of the saint is narrated in forty chapters. Death and entombment mark his entrance into the life, the promised land, towards which his mortal life had been, as it were, a prologue, a pilgrimage. Correspondingly, the Israelites spent forty years in their journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The symbolism is clear: it is used in the *Navigatio*, and also in the dedicatory acrostics which Milo used to introduce his metrical *Life of Amandus*.<sup>19</sup> Milo's poem, moreover, is divided into four books which correspond to the four Gospels, and also to the idea of Concord, illustrated in the four figures of the saint and King Dagobert, reconciled in Book III by means of the two close friends, the

laymen, Dado (Ouen, Audoin) and Eligius, who afterwards themselves became saints and bishops, in Rouen and Noyon respectively. The situation is summarised in the line *Salve, fida fides; felix concordia haveto*,<sup>20</sup> which occurs (III.291) when the pair are introduced. Concord is also implicit in the names of the saint and his parents, Amandus, Serenus and Amantia:

*Rem stupidus miror divino munere gestam,  
Quod sibi conveniunt genitor, genetrix genitusque,  
Nominibus dignis donorum munera fantes.*<sup>21</sup>

(I.134-6)

The word *conveniunt*, 'come together, agree, harmonise' is particularly significant in this passage.

MNE is on a smaller scale than the other *Lives* mentioned. It contains fourteen short chapters, of which the first nine are devoted primarily to the miracles performed by the saint during his earthly lifetime, the succeeding five to his posthumous miracles. Nine is also prominent in that *all* the miracles are narrated in the course of nine chapters, V-XIII. The number nine appertains primarily to the angels, corresponding as it does to their nine orders, and to the nine celestial spheres, for the movements of which the angels have responsibility. Nine is also the square of three, which is the number of the Trinity, whose place is above even the angels.<sup>22</sup>

MNE begins with the descent to incarnation of Christ from his place with the Father beyond the celestial spheres, and continues with the labours undertaken by the community of saints generally, the bright stars, who carried on his earthly work after the Ascension, the return to the Father. Ninian was one who joined in the task of bringing humanity from death to the golden-glowing stars in the starry sky (*Sic hominum cuneos graui de morte uocatos/Duxit ad astriferi rutilantia sidera celi*).<sup>23</sup> Candida Casa sparkles like a star. Ninian restores light and life by curing blindness and raising the dead, and eventually is carried by the shining host, the angels, beyond the starry sky to the glory of the Trinity:

*Ergo ubi utilitas morientes liquerat artus,  
Spiritus extimplo precinctus agmine claro,  
Tegmine iam niueo fulgens ceu fosforus axe,  
Angelicis uectus ulnis super astra polorum,  
Inter sanctorum globos cuneosque perennes  
Transit et, altithroni penetralia uisere regis  
Lectus, in aula poli turmis celestibus ille  
Iunctus conspicue cernit trinitatis honorem.*<sup>24</sup>

(269-276)

His work, which during his life has been an extension of Christ's, continues after his death. The climax is proclaimed by an angel, and forms a kind of Second Coming; the venerable Plecgils, like Simeon in the Temple, is permitted to hold the Christ-child in his arms as he celebrates Mass in the church of St Ninian.

The movement of the poem, that is to say, is one of emanation from beyond the celestial spheres, emanation, however, which throughout earthly existence retains stellar quality, and which is climaxed by subsequent triumphant return through the spheres, with angelic accompaniment. The entire series of Ninianic miracles is completed by the union of mortal and transcendent, Plecgils and Christ, in the sacrament of the altar. The number nine bears an obvious relationship to this movement, and the author of MNE may well have felt that its inclusion was essential to his purposes, even if it led to the exclusion of certain miracle stories.

Evidence confirming an interest at Anglian Whithorn in numerology and related literary techniques is provided by the *Hymnus Sancti Nynie Episcopi*, which accompanies MNE in the Bamberg manuscript.<sup>25</sup> This poem is constructed on the model of Bede's hymn to the virgin saint Aedilthryd (*Historia Ecclesiastica* IV.18.), and on the analogy of the Hebrew alphabetic (acrostic) psalms. The hymn contains twenty-seven couplets. In the first twenty-three, the sequence of the initial letters follows the order of the alphabet from A to Z, omitting J, U and W. The initials of the final four couplets constitute the word AMEN. The alphabetic reference is probably to the phrase which in the first and last of the twenty-two chapters of *Revelation* John places in the mouth of Christ, 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.' (The Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two characters.) The final four couplets accept and confirm the message of the first twenty-three in terms, particularly, of the saint celebrated in the hymn. The number twenty-seven, finally, is not only the cube of three, but is also associated with the Third Person of the Christian Trinity, the Holy Spirit. The numerology of the hymn thus has strong trinitarian overtones, with the emphasis falling on God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

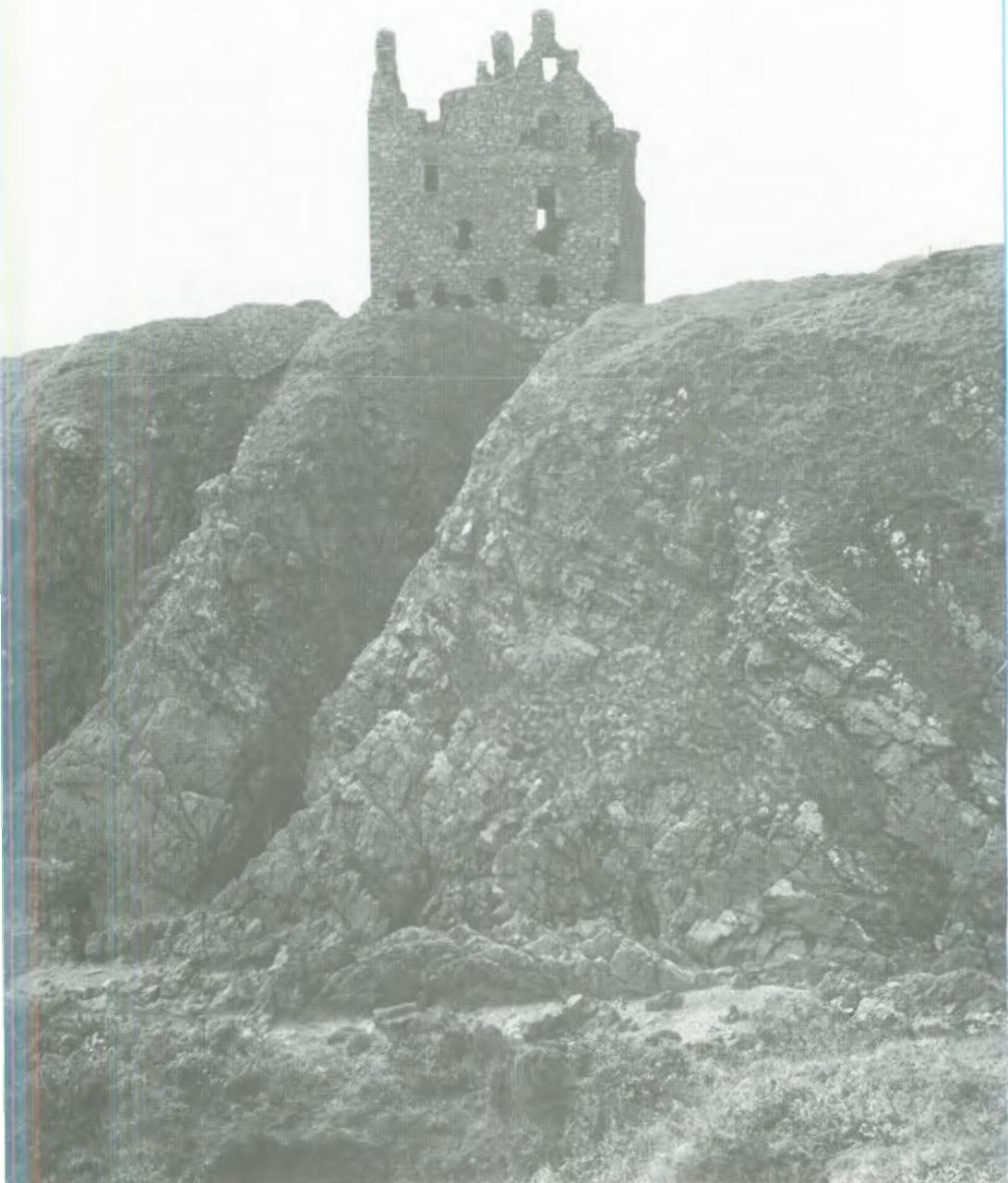
Whatever its relationship to the historical fact of the life of St Ninian, MNE certainly throws some interesting light on the literary culture of Whithorn in the eighth century.

#### Notes

1. I have used the edition by C. Plummer (2 vols., Oxford, 1896). There is a later edition with translation by R. A. B. Mynors and B. Colgrave (Oxford, 1969). The Penguin translation, with the slightly misleading title *A History of the English Church and People* (Harmondsworth, 1955), is by Leo Sherley-Price. Later editions of this last have been revised by R. E. Latham.
2. Strecker, K. (ed.), *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini* IV.iii. (Berlin, 1923), 943-962. Also included is the *Hymnus Sancti Nynie Episcopi*, discussed at the end of this paper: with translation, MacQueen, W. M., *TDGAS*, (1959-60), 21-57. All quotations are from the latter.
3. Ed. with translation, Forbes, A. P., *Lives of S. Ninian and S. Kentigern, The Historians of Scotland* 5, Edinburgh, 1874), 6-26 (translation), 137-157 (text).
4. Bede's metrical *Life* is edited by Jaeger, W., *Bedas metrische Vita sancti Cuthberti, Palaestra* 198 (Leipzig, 1935); Alcuin's *Vitae* of Willbrord will be found in Migne, *Patrologia: Series Latina* CI (Paris, 1863), with the prose version

- occupying columns 694-714, the verse 714-722. The poems by Milo and Heiric are edited by Traube, L, in *MGH: Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini III* (Berlin, 1896), 561-609 and 432-517 respectively.
5. Levison, W. (ed.), *MGH, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum VIII* (Berlin, 1920), 247-283; translation by Hoare, F. R., *The Western Fathers* (London, 1954; Harper Torchbrook (ed.), (New York, 1965), 284-320.
  6. MacQueen, J., *St. Nynia* (Edinburgh, 1961), 4-5.
  7. The suggestion sometimes made, that Bede received his information from Pictavia, perhaps on the occasion of the embassy sent in 710 by the Pictish king, Nechtan mac Derili, to Ceofrith, abbot of Wearmouth, is contradicted by the general Whithorn emphasis of Bede's narrative, and also by the fact that Bede's account of Ninian appears to be a late addition to the *Historia Ecclesiastica*.
  8. *Bede*, II.127.
  9. See, for instance, on the interpretation of the literary evidence, Levison, 'An Eighth Century Poem on St. Ninian,' *Antiquity* 14 (1940), 280-291; Anderson, A. O., 'Ninian and the Southern Picts,' *SHR*, 27 (1948), 25-47; Chadwick, N. K., 'St. Ninian: A Preliminary Study of the Sources,' *TDGAS*, 27 (1950), 9-53; Grosjean, P., 'Les Pictes apostats dans l'épître de S. Patrice,' *Analecta Bollandiana*, 75 (1958), 354-78; MacQueen, J., *St. Nynia*, 7-12, 'History and Miracle Stories in the Biography of Nynia,' *Innes Review*, 13.2 (1962), 115-29; Fahy, D., 'The Historical Reality of St Ninian,' *Innes Review*, 15 (1964), 35-46; Wilson, P. A., 'St Ninian and Candida Casa: The Literary Evidence From Ireland,' *TDGAS*, 41 (1964), 156-85, 'St Ninian: Irish Evidence Further Examined,' *TDGAS*, 41 (1969), 140-159; Kirby, D. P., 'Bede's Native Sources for the *Historia Ecclesiastica*,' *BJRL*, 48 (1966), 341-371, 'Bede and the Pictish Church,' *Innes Review*, 24 (1973), 6-25; Boyle, A., 'Saint Ninian: Some Outstanding Problems,' *Innes Review* 19 (1968), 57-74.
  10. The phrase used (v.42) is *cuius in aduentu gaudet clementia Rome*; I give the translation in its immediate context: 'Then he proceeded on sacred foot, seeking to be confirmed by the holy offices of the Pope who happened at that time to be holding this high office, deemed worthy to guard the memorials of his predecessors of old and the hill of apostolic triumphs: at his coming the clemency of Rome rejoiced.'  
The reference to 'predecessors' suggests that the poet was well aware that Ninian was not a contemporary of the very early Pope Clement; the use of the word 'memorials' may, as suggested in the text, be a reference to Pope Siricius.
  11. The evidence is partly archaeological, partly based on Jerome, *De viris illustribus* 15, written in 392. The church was built on the site of a private house used for Christian worship, the *titulus Clementis*. See Guglielmo Matthiae, *Le chiese di Roma dal IV al X secolo*, vol. III of *Roma cristiana*, Paluzzi, C. G. (ed.), (Rome, 1962), 59, 70-71. For help in preparing this note, I am much indebted to my colleague, Mr J. C. Higgitt, Dept of Fine Art, University of Edinburgh.
  12. Above, n.5.
  13. Plummer, *Bede*, I.364-387; this is immediately followed by the anonymous *Historia Abbatum* (I.388-404).
  14. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, CXX. Paschasius' *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini* occupies columns 1267-1350, his later defence of his position, the *Epistola ad Frudegardum*, columns 1351-1366.

15. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* s.v. 'Rabanus Maurus.' His refutation of Paschasius occupies chapter XXXIII, 'De eucharistia', of his *Poenitentiale ad Heribaldum* (Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, CX, 492-494). Ratramnus' *De Corpore et Sanguine Domini* will be found in Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, CXXI, 123-170.
16. Pauphilet, A. (ed.), (Paris, 1923); translated Matarasso, P. M., *The Quest of the Holy Grail* (Harmondsworth, 1969).
17. MacQueen, J., *Numerology* (Edinburgh, 1985), 58-63.
18. Ed. and translated, Colgrave, B., *Two Lives of St. Cuthbert* (Cambridge, 1940).
19. Above, n.4.
20. Hail, faithful faith! Happy concord, hail!
21. 'I am lost in astonishment at the outcome of divine grace, that begetter, bearer and borne should harmonise in proclaiming graces with names that are appropriate to the gifts.'
22. *Numerology*, 81-94.
23. 'Thus he brought hosts of men summoned from grievous death to the golden-glowing stars in the starry sky;' (25-26).
24. 'Thus when the breath of life had left his dying limbs, immediately surrounded by the shining host and now blazing bright in snow-white vestment, like Phosphorus in the sky, he was carried in angel arms beyond the stars of the sky, and passing through the companies of the saints and the everlasting hosts, joyful at visiting the innermost shrine of the King throned on high, he clearly perceived, united as he was with the heavenly hosts in the halls of heaven, the glory of the Trinity.'
25. Codex Bambergensis BII.10. of the eleventh century.



*Dunskey Castle: general view from south.*