

St Ninian's Cave

St Ninian's Cave, which is situated on the coast of the Irish Sea about 5 km south-west of Whithorn, has been a focus for pilgrimage for over a thousand years.

The cave is V-shaped on plan, measuring 10 m in depth by a maximum of 5 m in width below a roof that ranges in height from 7 m at its mouth on the east to 3 m at the rear. However, geological features and documentary evidence make it clear that the cave once extended farther to the east, and the majority of the carved crosses are situated in the outer portion of the original cave, where the roof has long since collapsed and the debris removed.

Recent Survey

The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) survey of St Ninian's Cave was undertaken in 2004 at the request of Historic Scotland, with the aim of creating an up-to-date record of the cave and the incised Early Christian crosses carved on its south wall.

Specialist laser survey equipment was used to plot the shape of the cave, its geological characteristics and the locations of all the crosses. This plot was then used to create a drawing of the cave wall, shown overleaf. In addition, all the crosses were recorded in detail by scale drawings and specialist photography.



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RCAHMS

The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) collects, records and interprets information on the architectural, industrial, archaeological and maritime heritage of Scotland. You can use our online databases and mapping services to view over 60,000 digital images and to search for information on more than 250,000 buildings or sites, over a million aerial photographs and some 2.5 million other photographs, drawings and manuscripts. You can then visit our search room to consult original archive material (Monday to Friday, 9.30am – 4.30pm).

The Whithorn Story

Whithorn's association with Scotland's first saint, Ninian, made it an important and famous pilgrimage centre. Pilgrims from all over the world came and still continue to visit the site. Royal pilgrims included Robert the Bruce, David II, Mary Queen of Scots and James IV who came every year of his reign. Archaeologists have revealed clues about the way people here lived, worked, worshipped, died and were buried. The Whithorn Story exhibition in the visitor centre tells the story of Whithorn through the ages and a combined ticket also gives access to the Historic Scotland Museum display of early Christian carved stones including the portable stones from the cave.



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Early Christian Carved Crosses at St Ninian's Cave



The Crosses

The crosses have been carved into the south wall of the cave, though only two (**s,t**) are situated within the section that is still roofed. The main group of outline crosses, which have wedge-shaped arms, curved armpits and a small dot at the centre (**g,h,i,j,s,t**), show Anglian influence. They probably date from the ninth century, when Whithorn was under the control of the Kingdom of Northumbria.

During the course of the survey, RCAHMS noted a number of previously unrecorded crosses, including two small ringed-crosses (**k,r**). These, along with the cross with barred terminals (**d**) may belong to the period of the early Celtic church, pre-dating the Northumbrian conquest of Galloway.

Chi-Rho Symbol

RCAHMS also recorded a comparatively rare Chi-Rho symbol (**p**), so-called because it is formed from the first two letters of the name of Christ in Greek $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma = \text{CRISTOS}$.

Another possible example of this early form of the symbol is visible on the fifth century 'Latinus' stone, which was found in Whithorn and can now be seen in the Whithorn Priory Museum.

