

## Saint Hilda

Hilda of Whitby (c. 614–680) is a Christian saint and the founding abbess of the monastery at Whitby, which was chosen as the venue for the Synod of Whitby. An important figure in the conversion of England to Christianity, she was abbess at several monasteries and recognized for the wisdom that drew kings to her for advice. The source of information about Hilda is *The Ecclesiastical History of the English* by the Venerable Bede in 731.

According to Bede, Hilda (or Hild, the Old English form of her name) was born in 614, the second daughter of Hereric, nephew of Edwin of Northumbria, and his wife Breguswith. Her elder sister, Herewith, married Æthelric, brother of King Anna of East Anglia, who with all of his daughters became renowned for their saintly Christian virtues.

When Hilda was still an infant, her father was murdered by poisoning while in exile at the court of the British King of Elmet in what is now West Yorkshire. It generally is assumed that she was brought up at King Edwin's court in Northumbria. In 627 King Edwin was baptised on Easter Day, April 12, along with his entire court, which included Hilda, in a small wooden church hastily constructed for the occasion near the site of the present York Minster. The ceremony was performed by the monk-bishop Paulinus, who had come from Rome with Augustine at the request of the pope on what is referred to as the Gregorian mission. He accompanied Æthelburg of Kent, a Christian princess, who was the daughter of King Ethelbert of Kent and the Merovingian princess Saint Bertha, when Æthelburg came North from Kent to marry King Edwin. As queen, Æthelburg continued to practice her Christianity and, no doubt, influenced her husband's thinking, as her mother had influenced her father.

From the date of her baptism until 647 nothing is known about Hilda. It seems likely that when King Edwin was killed in battle in 633 she went to live with her sister at the East Anglian court. Bede resumes her story at a point when she was about to join her widowed sister at Chelles Abbey in Gaul. Hilda decided instead, to answer the call of St. Aidan, Bishop of Lindisfarne and chose to return to Northumbria to live as a nun.

In 657 Hilda became the founding abbess of a new monastery at Whitby, then known as Streonshalh; she remained there until her death. Archaeological evidence shows that her monastery was in the Celtic style, with its members living in small houses, each for two or three people. The tradition in double monasteries, such as Hartlepool and Whitby, was that men and women lived separately, but worshipped together in church. The exact location and size of the church associated with this monastery, is unknown. Bede states that the original ideals of monasticism were maintained strictly in Hilda's abbey. All property and goods were held in common; Christian virtues were exercised, especially peace and charity. Everyone had to study the Bible and do good works.

Bede describes Hilda as a woman of great energy, who was a skilled administrator and teacher. She gained such a reputation for wisdom that kings and princes sought her advice. Although Hilda must have had a strong character she inspired affection. As Bede writes, "All who knew her called her mother because of her outstanding devotion and grace."

King Oswiu chose Hilda's monastery as the venue for the Synod of Whitby, the first synod of the Church in his kingdom. He invited churchmen from as far away as Wessex to attend the synod. Most of those present, including Hilda, accepted the King's decision to adopt the method of calculating Easter currently used in Rome, establishing Roman practice over Celtic practice as the norm in Northumbria. The monks from Lindisfarne, who would not accept this, withdrew to Iona and later, to Ireland.

Hilda suffered from fever for the last six years of her life, but she continued to work until her death on November 17, 680 (her Feast Day), at what was then thought to be the advanced age of sixty-six. In her last year she set up another monastery, fourteen miles from Whitby, at Hackness. She died after receiving last rites, and her legend holds that at the moment of her passing the bells of the monastery of Hackness tolled. A nun named Begu also claimed to have witnessed Hilda's soul being borne to heaven by angels.