St. Hilda or Hild, Abbess

Copied from Butler’s *Lives of the Saints*, which in turn is mostly based on Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History.* Although Butler’s account is dated, he is using early material, and little more information is available. Simpson’s book *Hilda of Whitby: A Spirituality for Now* uses the same information and pads it out with informed conjecture and speculation.

By despising the world for Christ, this saint became greater, even in the eyes of men, than royalty itself could have made her: but she was truly great only because the applause and veneration of this whole island was to her a most grievous persecution, the dangers of which alarmed her humble soul more than the threats of fire and sword could have done. Hilda was daughter of Hereric, nephew to St. Edwin, king of the Northumbers; and she was baptized by St. Paulinus, together with that prince, when she was but fourteen years old. The grace of this sacrament she always preserved without spot, and, from the moment she became a member of the kingdom of God, the obligations and happiness of this great spiritual dignity took up all her thoughts, and engrossed her whole soul. The better to attend to them alone she left her friends and country, and went into the kingdom of the East Angles, where her cousin, the most religious king Annas, reigned. Her first design was to retire to Chelles, in France, where her sister, St. Hereswide, served God: with her she passed one year, till, upon her death St. Aidan prevailed upon Hilda to return into Northumberland, where he settled her in the small nunnery upon the river Were, founded by the first Northumbrian nun, Heiu. After living there one year, she was made abbess of a numerous monastery at Heortea,\* or Heterslie, now Hartlepool, in the bishopric of Durham; and some years after called to found a great double monastery, the one of men, and the other of women, at Streaneshalch, (that is, bay of the Light-house,) afterwards called Prestby, from the number of priests that lived there, and at present Whitby, (or Whitebay,) in Yorkshire. All her monasteries were destroyed by the Danes, about two hundred and fifty years after her death; only this last was rebuilt in 1067, for Benedictine monks, and flourished till the suppression of religious houses. St. Hilda, for her sanctity and her wisdom, in conducting souls to God, was most dear to St. Aidan and other holy prelates; and kings and princes frequently repaired to Streaneshalch to consult her in affairs of the greatest difficulty and importance. This holy abbess, who was eminent in all virtues, excelled particularly in prudence, and had a singular talent in reconciling differences, and in maintaining concord, being herself endowed with the spirit of charity, meekness, and peace.

The monastery of men at Streaneshalch, became a nursery of holy and learned prelates; and out of it St. Bosa, St. Hedda, Ostfor, St. John of Beverley, and St. Wilfrid were raised to the episcopal dignity. In this monastery St. Wilfrid confuted Colman and the Scottish monks concerning the due celebration of Easter. The nunnery of St. Hilda was not less famous, Oswy, king of the Northumbers, was the chief benefactor, or founder of this house. He had reigned twelve years, endured many devastations of his dominions from Penda, the cruel Mercian king, and in vain attempted by presents to gain his friendship, when that sworn enemy of the Christian name, who had already murdered five Christian kings, (Annas, Sigebert, Egric, Oswald, and Edwin,) undertook the entire conquest of Northumberland, though in the seventy-eighth year of his age. Oswy, finding himself too weak for human relief, and all his offers and gifts rejected, turned them into vows to implorethe divine assistance, and devoted his daughter, then lately born, to perpetual virginity, with certain portions of land for endowing monasteries. His vows produced greater effects than his treaties; for, with a small army, he defeated the Mercians and their allies, though thirty times more in number; and slew Penda himself upon the banks of the Aire, near Seacroft, a village about three miles from Leeds, in Yorkshire, in 655. From this victory, the village of Winfield seems to have taken its name; and by it Oswy was raised to the height of power; so that in three years he subdued all Mercia, and the greatest part of the country of the Picts, in the north. According to his promise, he gave his daughter Elfleda, scarce then a year old, to be consecrated to God under the care of St. Hilda, at Heortea, by whom she was removed, two years after, to Streaneshalch. The king gave to this house twelve estates of land for maintaining religious persons, each estate being ten families. Oswy dying in 670, after a reign of twenty-eight years, his widow, Ealflede, who was daughter to the holy king Edwin, retired to this monastery, and there ended her days in the exercises of a religious life. St. Hilda died in 680, being sixty-three years old, of which she had spent thirty-three in a monastic life. A nun at Hakenes, thirteen miles from Whitby, on the strand, saw her soul carried up to bliss by angels. She was succeeded in the government of her monastery by the royal virgin, Elfleda, who, after serving God sixty years, went to his eternal embraces. In the church of St. Peter, besides St. Hilda, and the royal virgin Elfleda, were interred king Oswy, his mother Eanfled, his mother’s father Edwin, and many other great persons. The body of St. Hilda, after the devastation of the monastery by the Danes, Inguar and Hubba, was carried to Glastonbury by Titus, the abbot, who fled thither. In the time of Hugh, earl of Chester, in the reign of the conqueror, William de Percy, ancestor to the Percies, earls of Northumberland, rebuilt the monastery for Benedictin monks, in which state it continued till the suppression of monasteries.