CHAPTER 7

THE CORNERSTONE OF MARGARET’S CULT

The critical first step in the cultivation of the memory of Margaret was the composition of her Vita sometime between 1100 and 1107 by Turgot in response to a request by Margaret’s daughter, now queen of England. How much of this written record was the creation of Turgot, and how much was an accurate reflection of Margaret’s words and actions? To what extent was it a collaboration between the author, the subject, and the patron? Here, the hagiographical interpretation encroaches upon the historical record, informing and shaping the final product. The initial task, then, is to identify and to assess a hypothetical original. Of the surviving versions of the Vita, the Cotton Tiberius E manuscript is outside the temporal framework of this study and the Acta Sanctorum edition of the lost Vaucelles manuscript is somewhat redundant because it is almost identical to the Cotton Tiberius Diii manuscript. This analysis therefore focuses on a comparison between the versions of the Vita in the Cotton Tiberius Diii and Dunfermline manuscripts, hypothesizing that those passages that are common to both texts are most likely to have been original to Turgot. After having identified this hypothetical original text, it is then possible to ascertain Turgot’s perception of both Margaret and his own role in the creation of her memory.

The shared text can be divided into four sections: the incipit, prologue, and opening passage of the Vita; Margaret’s public acts; Margaret’s private devotion; and her illness and death. The incipit and prologue are formulaic, beginning with Turgot’s address to his patron, Margaret’s daughter, and continuing with a typical humility disclaimer. The Vita proper is introduced with an excursus on the meaning of names, continues with a dramatic recounting of Turgot’s grief at her death, and extends to the first sentence of the genealogy. This first section comprises almost one out of the 17 folios of the Dunfermline Vita.

After this introduction, the two manuscripts offer drastically different versions of Margaret’s genealogy. They converge again with the delineation of Margaret’s public acts—those acts that are externally directed, intended either to provide a model of behavior for others, or to correct errors in others. Turgot describes these acts in the following order: Margaret’s foundation of a church at Dunfermline; her patronage of churches; her general comportment; her education of her children; her study of holy writings; her example to the king; her care for the court and the royal dignity; and her Church reforms. This section is significantly longer, consisting of four folios in the Dunfermline Vita.

Turgot indicates a transition from an externally- to an internally-centered focus by listing Margaret’s private devotional practices, but only after noting that she had first

C. Keene, Saint Margaret, Queen of the Scots

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“eliminated the stains of error in others.” He details her daily pious practices, specifically her humility, prayer, fasts, charitable deeds (including the ransoming of slaves), visits to hermits, and provision for pilgrims to St. Andrews. It is significant that Turgot opts to portray these last two public acts—the patronage of both hermits and pilgrims—as acts of private devotion. Such details serve as an introduction to Turgot’s increased focus on Margaret’s exaggerated piety during Lent and Advent: her rigorous daily schedule of prayers; her personal attendance on nine orphans and 300 poor; her care for 24 poor throughout the year; and her excessive fasting. At this point, Margaret’s saintly reputation would typically have benefited from a pious, cloistered widowhood, as was the case in the Vitae of Mathilda and the Epitaphium of Adelheid. Instead, this section of the Vita, focusing on pronounced expressions of devotion, might serve a similar function, allowing Turgot to reconcile her sanctity with her royal authority. Attention to Margaret’s private devotional practices constitutes a little more than two folios in the Dunfermline Vita.

Turgot’s consideration of more eschatological concerns is the focus of the fourth and final part of the Vita. He begins with the single miracle recorded in Margaret’s Vita: the loss and miraculous recovery of her Gospel Book. The book had been unwittingly dropped by a servant while crossing a ford. It was later found at the bottom of the river, lying open, but still miraculously intact. Interpreting this remarkable event as divine approval, Turgot exclaims: “Wherefore let others contemplate what they should then think; I do not doubt that this was a demonstrable sign from the Lord, on account of His love for the venerable queen.” The details of the episode are corroborated by a poem inscribed at the beginning of the Gospel Book itself. Importantly, the Latin text identifies the “holy queen” in the present tense (Salvati semper sint rex reginaque sancta), suggesting that, at least for the author of the poem (possibly Turgot), Margaret was recognized for her sanctity during her lifetime. Turgot then proceeds to allude to Margaret’s gift of prophecy three times: when she senses her own impending death; when she predicts that Turgot will survive her; and when she perceives that the kingdom had suffered a tragedy even before being apprised of the deaths of her husband and son.

Finally, Turgot describes the circumstances of Margaret’s death. He accentuates the emotive quality of the text by rendering it in the first person rather than the third, even though he had no firsthand knowledge since the details had been related to him by the priest who had attended her in her final moments. The priest later joined Turgot as a monk at Durham, where he had occasion to relate tearfully the story to Turgot “more than once,” an assertion Turgot includes in order to increase the credibility of this firsthand account. As the queen lay dying, reciting the Fiftieth Psalm for comfort, her son Edgar entered her chamber to bring her the tragic news that both her husband and her eldest son had been killed. He hesitates, perceiving his mother’s suffering as she struggles with the agonies of her own approaching death. Reading the truth on his face, she convinces him to tell her everything. Here we have a tale full of compassion by and for all those concerned: the priest for young Edgar, Edgar for his dying mother, Margaret for both her dead husband and child, and also for the conflicted and confused son who had to deliver the news. Shortly after this exchange, Margaret’s soul is released in a manner that bears all the hallmarks of hagiographical treatment. Instead of railing against the horrible turn of events that had resulted in the deaths of those dearest to her, she welcomes the added tribulation, offering it up to God. Like saints before her, she embraces her death, accepting it peacefully. Throughout, the exquisite details of her physical and emotional anguish, and her passive acceptance of such torments, underscore the function of this section as an abbreviated passio. This section consists of a little more than two folios in the Dunfermline Vita.