
There has been some recent scholarly work on St Margaret of Scotland in article form, and there are four existing popular biographies of the saint/queen, but Keene’s work is the first book-length scholarly biography of Margaret. Keene’s book aims to “bridge the gap between what is known about Margaret and what has been surmised” (p. 1). It also aims to form a counterpoint to past scholarship that has either accepted Margaret’s *Vita* as historical without question or sought to downplay her political significance (p. 1). Therefore, Keene introduces the theoretical idea of “hagiographical truth” (p. 4); the idea that hyperbole and exaggeration might not have reflected reality as we understand it, but still communicated the “truth”, in this case of Margaret’s sainthood. As such, Keene provides a scholarly historical biography that uses the hagiographical as well as historical sources on Margaret’s life with nuance and sensitivity in order to provide a new and very productive perspective.

Chapter One deals with Margaret’s lineage, both historical and fictional. Keene deals substantially with the question Margaret’s mother – who is only identified as “Agatha” – and makes the interesting assertion that perhaps it is even the case that Agatha’s family background was humble enough to be purposely elided.

Chapter Two argues that, through growing up under the mix religious traditions in Hungary, Margaret became familiar with religious diversity and reform in a way that aided her reforming work as Queen of Scots.

In Chapter Three Keene suggests that Margaret’s probable education at Wilton Abbey provided her with the necessary models for good queenship, and more specifically that “St. Edith was a textual model for Queen Edith, who in turn was a living model for Margaret” (p. 33). Further work could be done to explore whether it was that Queen Edith’s life influenced Margaret’s own, or the work
of Edith’s biographer influenced the work of Margaret’s biographer and later chronicle representations.

Chapter Four considers Margaret’s marriage to Malcolm III (Canmore). In this chapter, Keene argues that a political marriage between Malcolm and Margaret may well have been planned prior to Margaret’s arrival in Scotland, challenging the Vita and later chronicle accounts of a chance romantic meeting.

Keene builds on this exploration of political tensions in Chapter Five, where she argues that Margaret provided a focus for Scottish resistance to Norman power, both in her role as Anglo-Saxon princess and through her concerted efforts at Church reform, which ensured that the Normans could not obtain papal support in claiming ecclesiastical lordship over Scotland.

Chapter Six suggests a dual purpose to Margaret’s pious deeds. Keene synthesizes an argument that Margaret modelled her life after royal saints such as St. Radegund and Edward the Confessor with the suggestion that her pious actions, which included the founding of the “Queensferry” for pilgrims to St Andrews also had important political “work” to do in bolstering Scottish power.

In Chapter Seven Keene offers a new close-reading of Turgot’s Vita in which “Margaret’s general comportment, as described by Turgot, bears striking similarities with Bede’s description of the exemplary abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow” (p. 84).

Chapter Eight deals with the way in which Turgot’s Vita was put to varying dynastic use in England and Scotland and how the Dunfermline Vita might have developed in order to emphasize both Margaret’s Anglo-Saxon ancestry (in contrast to the Norman focus of Turgot) and to give Malcolm a more prominent role.

In the final chapter, Keene traces the development of Margaret’s cult in order to show how it developed in response to and in tandem with the English cult of Edward the Confessor. One avenue that would certainly benefit from further research is Keene’s focus on localization, and it could be developed to consider how the anchoring of Margaret’s cult at Dunfermline has affected later literary and historical representations of Margaret.
All in all, Keene’s book is an engaging and informative scholarly biography of Margaret and also an invaluable reference resource for any student of Margaret, queenship or sanctity. This is in no small part due to the fact that Keene here produces the first edition of the Dunfermline version of Turgot’s *Vita*, which has not before been edited. More than anything, this book opens up a lot of intriguing and potentially very fertile questions for further research. I very much hope that it will spark further codicological scholarship on the Dunfermline MS and its relation to other accounts of Margaret’s life, and I think a very valuable area of study is opened up by Keene’s intriguing suggestion, after Mary Carruthers, that Margaret had a “self constructed out of bits and pieces of authors and the examples of predecessors” (p. 2). This could very productively be built on in order to examine how models of queenship interacted with both the behavior and the literary patronage of early medieval queens.

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