Saint Margaret

Patroness of Scotland

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Over the course of almost a thousand years much has been written about St. Margaret, “Patroness of Scotland”. Given the quantity and quality of material still being produced it may be thought that little can be contributed by a minor work such as this. That said, the intention of the present authors is primarily to explore the fate of her relics and to record her commemoration in recent years. Using the powerful tool of the internet, we have been able to uncover some material which would not have been easily accessible to earlier writers. Understanding of these matters, however, does require us initially to outline her ancestry, life and the circumstances leading to her canonisation.

St. Margaret was an English princess from the royal house of Wessex. Her grandfather was King Edmund Ironside but after the Danish conquest of England in 1016 Edmund’s sons were exiled. One of these, Edward the Exile, the father of Margaret, journeyed across northern and central Europe. In the 1040s he was in Hungary, a country which had only adopted Christianity in 1000 with the coronation of Stephen 1. Edward married Agatha, a Hungarian princess. Margaret was born in about 1045 and she had a brother, Edgar the Ætheling, and a sister Cristina. The family apparently resided at the castle of Nádasd in southern Hungary.

The descendants of Edmund Ironside

Still a child, Margaret came to England with the rest of her family when her father, Edward, was recalled in 1057 as a possible successor to her great-uncle, the childless Edward the Confessor. Edward the Exile died almost immediately on landing, the cause now unknown, and the family came under the protection of King Edward. Margaret resided at the English court where her brother, Edgar Ætheling, was considered a possible successor to the English throne. She found herself in the midst of the new flowering of intellect and spirit which was renewing Europe. Politically and culturally the court of the Confessor was Norman-French where all the new fashions and ideals of chivalry, art, scholarship and reawakened religious fervour were reshaping the destiny of England. The somewhat easy-going lifestyle associated with the English Benedictine
monasteries come under challenge from the Cluniac reforms, coming into England through Normandy. A physical embodiment of this religious zeal was the rebuilding of the Abbey of St. Peter at Westminster.

After the Confessor died in January 1066, Harold Godwinson rather than Edgar was selected as king. After Harold’s defeat at the battle of Hastings later that year, Edgar was proclaimed King of England. When the Normans advanced on London, Edgar and other leading English figures submitted to William the Conqueror who took him to Normandy before returning him to England in 1068. In that year Edgar, Margaret, Cristina and their mother Agatha fled north to Northumbria.

According to tradition, the widowed Agatha decided to leave Northumbria with her children and return to the continent. However, a storm drove their ship north to Scotland, where they sought the protection of King Malcolm III. Malcolm welcomed the party and supported Edgar against the Norman rulers in England. Attacks on Northumberland reduced much of the area to devastation.

By her early twenties, Margaret had experience of living in three royal courts and had absorbed cultural and religious practices from much of Europe.

Malcolm was a widower aged about forty with two sons and would have been attracted by the prospect of marrying one of the few remaining members of the Anglo-Saxon royal family.

The Marriage of King Malcolm and St. Margaret, by Alexander Runciman (1751-1785)

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle under the year 1067 records:-
“Then King Malcolm began to desire Edgar’s sister Margaret for his wife, but he and his men all argued against it for a long time, and she herself refused.
She said that she would not wed him or anyone, if God’s high mercy granted it, that she her maidenhead for the mighty Lord might keep in her heart and body in this brief life, in pure continence to please him. The king urged her brother pressingly until he said yes, and indeed he dared not do otherwise, because they had come under his rule....Then the king married her, although it was against her will. Her ways pleased him, and he thanked God who in his might had given him such a wife. He reflected thoughtfully, as he was a very wise man, and turned himself to God and scorned every sin.... This aforesaid queen afterwards performed many useful deeds in that country, to the glory of God, and also prospered well in kingly ways, as was in her nature: she was sprung from a faithful and noble kindred, her father was Edward Atheling, son of King Edmund, son of Ethelred, son of Edgar, son of Eadred, and so forth in that royal race; and her mother’s family goes back to Emperor Henry, who had dominion over Rome.”

The marriage of Malcolm and Margaret took place some time before the end of 1070. They were to have six sons and two daughters.

The main source of information on the life of Queen Margaret is from an account written by Turgot between 1100 and 1107. Born about 1050 he became Archdeacon and Prior of Durham and was elected Bishop of Saint Andrews at the wish of King Malcolm in 1107. He had links to the Scottish court and had been acquainted with the Queen. Turgot may not have known Queen Margaret intimately yet he had charge of the gold altar vessels in the noble church of the Trinity which the Queen had built at Dunfermline. It is not, however, likely that Turgot was a very welcome guest of King Malcolm, for Malcolm on one occasion drove both Turgot and Aldwine, his predecessor in the priorate of Durham, out of Melrose. If he ever visited the Scots Court or was confessor to the Queen, it is strange that neither fact should be recorded by Symeon of Durham. Turgot wrote at the request of her daughter, Matilda, wife of King Henry I of England (1100-1135). Small sections of this long work are shown below. The portrait drawn of her is extremely flattering without any fault of character being recorded.

“To the honourable and excellent Matilda, queen of the English, I servant of the servants of St Cuthbert, send the blessing of peace and health in this present life, and in that which is to come the chief good of all good things.

You have, by the request you made, commanded me (since a request of yours is to me a command) that I should narrate for you the particulars of the life of your mother, whose memory is held in veneration..... Whilst Margaret was yet in the flower of youth, she began to lead a very strict life, to love God above all things, to employ herself in the study of the Divine writings, and therein with joy to exercise her mind. Her understanding was keen to comprehend any matter, whatever it might be; to this was joined a great tenacity of memory, enabling her to store it up, along with a graceful flow of language to express it..... She was married to Malcolm, son of King Duncan, the most powerful king of the Scots.....This prudent queen directed all such things as it was fitting for her to regulate; the laws of the realm were administered by her counsel; by her care the influence of religion was extended, and the people rejoiced in the prosperity of their affairs. Nothing was firmer than her fidelity, steadier than her favour, or juster than her decisions; nothing was more enduring than her patience, graver than her advice, or more pleasant than her conversation.....First of all in regard to King Malcolm: by the help of God she made him most attentive to the works of justice, mercy, almsgiving, and other virtues.....”

The emphasis of his text is on the piety and the charitable good works of Queen Margaret. She served orphans and the poor every day before she ate, and washed the feet of the poor in imitation of Christ. She rose at midnight every night to attend church services. Turgot also recalls her efforts to welcome merchants.
and promote trade, rebuild decaying churches, end the “strange rites” which characterised Scottish religious practice, for example the celebration of Mass “in a barbarous fashion”, free English captives held as slaves; and the miracle of her lost prayer book. Of this he wrote:

“She had a book of the Gospels beautifully adorned with gold and precious stones, and ornamented with the figures of the four Evangelists, painted and gilt. All the capital letters throughout the volume were radiant with gold. She had always felt a particular attachment for this book; more so than for any of the others which she usually read. It happened that as the person who carried it was once crossing a ford, he let the book, which had been carelessly folded in a wrapper, fall into the middle of the river. Unconscious of what had occurred, the man quietly continued his journey; but when he wished to produce the book, suddenly it dawned upon him that he had lost it. Long was it sought, but nowhere could it be found. At last it was discovered lying open at the bottom of the river. Its leaves had been kept in constant motion by the action of the water, and the little coverings of silk which protected the letters of gold from becoming injured by contact with the opposite page, were carried off by the force of the current. Who would fancy that the book could afterwards be of any value? Who would believe that even a single letter would have been visible? Yet of a truth, it was taken up out of the middle of the river so perfect, so uninjured, so free from damage, that it did not seem to have even been touched by the water. The whiteness of the leaves and the form of the letters throughout the volume remained exactly as they had been before it had fallen into the river, except that in part of the end leaves the least possible mark of damp might be detected. The book was conveyed to the queen, and the miracle was at the same time related to her; and she, having thanked Christ, valued it much more highly than she had done before. Whatever others may think, I for my part believe that this wonder was worked by our Lord out of His love for the venerable queen.”

There is in the Bodleian Library, Oxford a Gospel Book which is almost certainly that of Queen Margaret.
Margaret’s husband, Malcolm III, and their eldest son, Edward, were killed by the English in the Battle of Alnwick on 13th November 1093. Her son Edgar was left with the task of telling his mother of their deaths. Margaret was not yet fifty, but a life of constant austerity and fasting had taken their toll. Already ill, Margaret died on 16th November 1093, three days after the deaths of her husband and eldest son. She was buried in Dunfermline Abbey. In 1072, by invitation from King Malcolm and Queen Margaret, Benedictines from Canterbury had come to Scotland to found a Priory Church in Dunfermline dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Its rank was changed from a daughter house to an independent abbey in 1128 by King David I. The church served as the mausoleum of Scottish kings was to become an important centre of pilgrimage as the cultus of St. Margaret developed.

Popular conviction of her sanctity increased especially after 1245 when brilliant flashes of light were seen coming from her tomb. King Alexander II and the Scottish bishops petitioned Pope Innocent IV to canonise “blessed Margaret” but there was a lack of adequate proof. In a letter to the Scottish people, “De indulgenzia XL dierum” in 1249 the Pope informed them that anyone visiting the church on the feast of Saint Margaret would gain a forty day indulgence. A further appeal was made and, being convinced that the miraculous flashes of light were genuine, the Pope formally canonised Queen Margaret in 1250. His canonisation oration incorporated the comment:

“A precious pearl saw the light in Hungary, and lived at the court of the Confessor, a School of Holiness. Torn from homeland, you embraced another. You became Queen and Mother, the glory of Scots. Your Queen’s crown, a crown of Charity. Your way, the Royal Way of the Cross....Once, mere men, placed crowns upon your head. But I, Innocent, Peter’s successor, Servant of Christ, now place upon your head, the greatest crown of all, sainthood.”

Eight months after canonisation a new tomb was completed and ready to receive her remains. On 13th July, 1250 the body of St. Margaret was exhumed in the presence of Alexander III, plus the great and the good of...
Scotland. The fifteenth-century monk of Dunfermline, who wrote the chronicle known as the Book of Pluscarden, gives an account of the events which followed.

In summary, as the officiating prelates opened the tomb the church was filled with the fragrant odour of flowers. They reverently raised the precious remains of the stone coffin in which they had originally been laid and placed them in a shrine of precious metals adorned with gems. As the solemn procession carrying the reliquary advanced to the new shrine, there came an unexpected interruption. As they passed the tomb of Malcolm Cenmorn, the bearers of the reliquary found themselves powerless to move. A sudden popular inspiration caused them to take up also the body of Malcolm and the procession moved forward with ease. Thus Malcolm was buried near his queen and shared to some extent her glory.

Later queens of Scotland looked to Saint Margaret for protection in childbirth. 

Queen Margaret, the wife of James IV and daughter of King Henry VII of England, paid 8 shillings when Luke of the Wardrobe was sent to
"feche Sanct Margarets Sark" when she gave birth to James V (father of Mary Queen of Scots) at Linlithgow Palace.

For three centuries lights were kept perpetually burning before the tomb. This appears to have been an oaken cabinet, elaborately carved, within which was a silver chest adorned with gold and precious stones containing her relics. These consisted of her skull with auburn golden flowing hair and various bones. This tomb was destroyed by Scottish religious reformers on the 28th March 1560.

These rioters had been much influenced by the sweeping condemnation of relics expressed by John Calvin. In his “Treatise on Relics” (1543), he observed that “the desire for relics is never without superstition, and what is worse, it is usually the parent of idolatry…..It is thus that the foolish fancy which people had at first for collecting relics, ended in this open abomination,—they not only turned from God, in order to amuse themselves with vain and corruptible things, but even went on to the execrable sacrilege of worshipping dead and insensible creatures, instead of the one living God.”

The circumstances of the tomb’s destruction and the fate of the Saint’s body is summarised in the following extract from an essay entitled “St. Margaret Queen of Scotland” by Right Rev. Mgr. David McRoberts.

“One would have expected such a place to escape destruction, even at the hands of the soi-disant reformers, but the Scots Calvinist revolutionaries, like their French counterparts, in their hatred of the ancient faith and traditional loyalties, must vent their fury on the shrines of saints and tombs of kings alike.

‘Upon the 28th day of March (1560) the wholl lordis and barnis that were on thys syd of Forth passed to Stirling and be the way kest doun the Abbey of Dunfermling.’

The rabble seemed to have vented their rage mainly on the monastic buildings and the choir and sanctuary of the church: the altars and royal tombs were desecrated and the Lady Chapel and St. Margaret’s shrine despoiled. The monks of Dunfermline however had foreseen the attack and had hidden away the reliquary of St. Margaret and St. David, and the sepulchres of Bruce and Randolph.

About this time the head of St. Margaret was enclosed in a separate reliquary and we find it being brought for a short time to Edinburgh Castle, at the request of Queen Mary, who was there awaiting the birth of her child, the future James VI. The monks of Dunfermline seem latterly to have withdrawn from the abbey, the choir of which had become ruinous since the violence of 1560, and the nave had gradually been appropriated to the preaching of the Knoxian Evangel. They retired to a house belonging to the Laird of Dury being ‘a monck of Dunfermling.’ The relics of St. Margaret remained at Craigluscarr some seventeen years until, in 1597, the precious relic of St. Margaret’s head was entrusted to John Robie, a young lad on his way to the college at Douay. Thenceforward, for some two hundred years, the relic was venerated in the Scots College at Douay: indulgences were granted by various popes to those who devoutly visited the College Church on the feast of St. Margaret. According to Father Augustine Hay, a Canon Regular of St. Geneviève, Paris, who describes the reliquary in 1696, the relics of St. Margaret ‘are kept in the Scots College of Douay in a Bust of Silver. Her skull is enclosed in the head of the Bust whereupon there is a crown of Silver gilt, enriched with several pearls and Precious Stones. In the Pedestall, which is of Ebony indented with silver, her hair is kept and exposed to the view of everyone through a Glass of Crystall. The Bust is reputed the third Statue in Douay for its valour (value). There are likewise several Stone, Red and Green on her Breast, Shoulders, and elsewhere. I cannot tell if they be upright, their bigness makes me fancy that they may be counterfitted.’ On the eve of the French Revolution the relic was seen by Father James Carruthers who, in his History of Scotland says: ‘It was still in the Scots College at Douay when I left it in the year 1785’; at that time the skull was complete and the queen’s auburn hair was still on it. It is said the relic was hidden away during the upheaval of the French Revolution, but since that time it has disappeared from human ken. The remainder of St. Margaret’s relics, together with those of her consort Malcolm Ceannmor, were apparently carried to Flanders and ultimately found their way into the possession of that inveterate relic collector Phillip II of Spain, who placed them in the Royal Monastery of the Escorial in two caskets entitled: St. Margaret, Queen and St. Malcolm King.”
In 1660 a book was published in Paris, written by a monk of Douay and called “The Idea of a Perfect Queen in the Life of St. Margaret of Scotland”. This gives more information about the removal of the relic of the head to Flanders:

“The coffer, wherein was the head and hair of St. Margaret, was, in the year 1597, delivered into the hands of the Fathers of the Society of Jesus, then Missioners in Scotland, who, seeing it was in danger to be lost, or prophaned, by the seditious Heriticks, transported it to Antwerp. The Lord John Malderus, bishop of that
city, that he might know the truth of this relick, examined very diligently, and upon oath, the Fathers of the Society, and gave an authentick attestation, under the seal of his office, dated the fifth of September, 1620.”

Daniel Papebroch (1628-1714), a Flemish Jesuit hagiographer, adds more information. “After seven years the relick was translated to the Scots College at Douay, where, by permission of Herman, Bishop of Arras..., it was again exposed as a genuine relick for public veneration.” Pope Innocent X, by a brief dated March 4th 1645, granted a plenary indulgence to those who should visit the church of the College on the festival of St. Margaret, and his grant was confirmed by his successors at various times afterwards.

In the post-Reformation period, the status of St. Margaret was boosted by the Scots College, Rome, established in 1600. The college chapel was structurally complete by 1646 and was planned to be opened for the Holy Year of 1650. One of the three altars was dedicated to St. Margaret and was adorned with a magnificent altarpiece, by an unknown Polish artist, showing St. Margaret at prayer. This painting, now in the refectory of the present Scots College, had been commissioned by William Aloysius Leslie. He also completed the decoration of the rest of the church using money from his uncle, Count Walter Leslie.

William Aloysius Leslie and his priest cousin Will Leslie both had attended Douai from an early age. The two Leslies petitioned for St Margaret's feast to be added to the universal calendar. This was ratified in
December 1673 by Clement X and her feast day was allocated to the 10th June. There is an account of one celebration of the feast of St. Margaret in the Scots College, Rome, on June 10th, 1717. King James III, the Old Pretender, had just returned from the unsuccessful 1715 Rising and visited the Scots College on the Feast of St. Margaret. William Aloysius also published a “Vita di Santa Margherita” in Italian in 1675. He had St. Margaret recognised as patron of the Scots College and as a Patron of Scotland. Most significantly from our viewpoint, he obtained a part of the relic of St. Margaret venerated at the Scots College, Douai.

The document of 24th April 1675 is extremely interesting. It records the receipt of this relic of Saint Margaret, Queen of Scotland from Thomas Robert, Rector of the Society of Jesus in Douai, by William Aloysius Leslie, Rector of the Scots College in Rome.

The third line details the nature of this gift which is described as “esse verso crines et tanias quibus S. Margarita Regina Scotia in vita utebatur”, that is “to be true hair……” However, a further document of authentication dates from 1938 under the authority of Cardinal Marchetti Selvaggiani which describes the relic as being “ex ossibus”, or “from the bones” of Saint Margaret Queen of Scotland.
In November 2015, the Scots College announced the marking of the Feast of St. Margaret with the revival of the tradition of venerating the relic of the Saintly Queen of Scotland. According to the Scots College “Facebook” page, “Students, Staff and Sisters of the Scots College have the opportunity today to spend some time in prayer before the relic, placed on the St. Margaret altar in the College crypt. Originally the high altar of the crypt, the changes of Vatican II meant that the altar, and the impressive altar piece mounted behind, now keep a constant watch over the chapel. The altar piece shows Margaret in prayer before a Celtic cross surrounded by spear heads, symbolising the hostility she faced in her acts of kindness.” The sculpture of St. Margaret was created for the new College building which opened in 1964. It was made by the well-known British sculptor Arthur Fleischmann.

The story of Queen Margaret’s Gospel Book is examined in depth in a Ph.D thesis written by T. Ratcliffe Barnett in 1925, exploring the influence which the Queen had on the Celtic Church in Scotland. “When Queen Margaret died in 1093 her precious Gospel Book would, according to the common custom of the time, be placed either in her tomb or enclosed in the shrine which contained her relics. When in 1250 the body of the saintly Queen was taken from the grave within Dunfermline Abbey and placed in a silver shrine adorned with jewels there is no mention by contemporaries of her Gospel Book. At the time of revolution, the shrine was plundered, Margaret’s head was taken to Edinburgh Castle and, according to Father Leslie, (Vita di Santa Margherita dal P. G. Lesles S.J., Roma 1675) several other valuables and sacred things were taken there at the same time. However, even when the head was transferred to Douai there was still no mention of a Gospel Book. In 1888, however, there was advertised a book which had been in the parish library of Brent-Sly in Suffolk. It was a little octavo volume of manuscript in shabby brown binding, and was advertised for sale on 26th July 1887 in Sotheby’s catalogue as - ”The Four Gospels - a manuscript on vellum of the fourteenth century illuminated in gold and colours, from the Brent-Ely Library.” This manuscript was purchased by the authorities of the Bodleian Library, Oxford for the sum of £6. When the book was examined experts declared that the style of writing was of the eleventh century and that the illuminated pages displayed very valuable old English work. Further, there was discovered on a fly-leaf at the beginning of the manuscript a poem written in Latin hexameters and this poem, Mr Madan maintained, was written in a hand which might be of date 1090 or a little later. The poem tells how the book was the property of a King and a holy Queen; that a servant had let it fall into a river while crossing a ford; that it lay there for a long time until a Knight (Miles) discovered it; and that not a mark was left on the painted pages except on two leaves at the end. This story of the Bodleian purchase happened to be told to a lady who remembered the similar incident described in Turgot’s “Life of Queen Margaret”, and the identity of the book was
practically established. On comparing the story in the poem with the story told in the "Life" they were found to tally in every detail. So this little book, with its style and ornamentation of the Canute period, was identified as the Gospel Book which Queen Margaret valued more highly than all her other books.

There are various reasons which support the theory that Turgot wrote the poem. He would naturally add it after the Queen's death when the book came into his hands. In that case this poem-leaf would not bear marks of being injured by water. And what are the facts? There is no mark of water on the poem-leaf, and the poem is written in another hand from that which wrote the Gospel Book. It is also written on a different kind of vellum. But the first page of the original book and the three last pages are distinctly crinkled by water. All this goes to show that the poem page was added later, written by someone who knew the whole history of the book, and written by a different hand from that of the original scribe. This is not the place to give an account of every detail of the manuscript. It is sufficient to say that the illuminations and the text itself which is written in a beautiful minuscule hand are of the same period as the Canute Gospels in the British Museum - that is, of the early eleventh century. Margaret in all probability, therefore, acquired this Gospel Book when she was resident at the Court of Edward the Confessor (1057-1066) and would naturally bring it to Scotland with her when she married Malcolm Canmore. Such Gospel portions were not uncommon in the service of the church during the last part of the Anglo-Saxon period, and Queen Margaret's Gospel Book should be compared with two others of Anglo-Saxon origin which still exist - the Gospels of Wadham College (1012-1030), and the Gospel Book of Bishop Ethelstan of Hereford (1012-1056)."

The return of a first-class relic of Saint Margaret to Scotland was achieved by the efforts of Bishop James Gillis. Born in 1802 in Montreal, Canada, a member of an old Catholic family he returned to Scotland in 1826, was ordained in 1827, became a bishop in 1837 serving as Bishop Apostolic of the Eastern District of Scotland between 1852-1864.
The Escurial in Spain was known to have possessed some relics of the Saint. Indeed the inventory of Phillip II, covering 1571 to 1598 states:

“We possess the following relics: 1, a bone, a small thing; 2, part of the flesh of the right leg, two finger lengths square; 3, part of a nerve of same leg, three finger breadths long.”

Bishop Gillis hoped to return some of these to a Scottish shrine.

We draw on “The History of St. Margaret’s Convent, Edinburgh” and the 1911 work “Life of the Princess Margaret, Queen of Scotland” by Samuel Cowan to summarise this demanding but ultimately successful process.

Cowan refers to the following communication from the Escurial, dated 1852. Unfortunately he does not state to whom it was addressed, probably Bishop Gillis.

“From the inventory and record of the holy relics and reliquaries which his Majesty Phillip II, bestowed on this his Royal House of St. Lawrence of the Escurial from the year 1571…we found the following regarding the relics of Queen Margaret of Scotland. In the first donation was comprised the following relics: A small bone of slight importance; a part of the flesh of the right leg two inches square; a part of a member of the same leg three inches long…..

There has been found in the cabinet allotted to holy relics a little box of fine wood containing relics of different Saints. In this box there was a little packet with two very small bones and a small inscription, ‘De Sancta Margarita…. Amongst those wrappers which were kept loose is one eight inches long and two and a half broad with two relics, each of which bears the simple inscription, ‘Sta Margarita’. There is a piece which looks like skin, and it seems to have been the size of half a dollar. The other is a fragment of bone apparently from the thigh, three inches long….There is a document testifying the authenticity of these relics of St. Margaret with all the forms and authorisation necessary to preclude every doubt as to their identity.”

The location of the relics of Saint Margaret was becoming a matter of considerable importance and inquiries were made elsewhere. The Sub-Prior of Douay wrote under the date 22nd July, 1854. Again the addressee is not stated.

“At the time of the great French Revolution, the head of St. Margaret was preserved not in our own College but in the Scots College of this town. The troubles obliged us all to flee. The present occupants made research but no trace of the relic (St. Margaret’s head) has been met with. Either the Scots conveyed it away with them in their flight, or it fell into the hands of men who respected nothing. The former supposition was given me as the more probable…..”
Another letter from an English student at Valladolia (Rv. T. Hoskins), exists dated 15th August 1854:-

“After the death of Queen Margaret, her body was interred in the Church of the Holy Trinity Dunfermline where it remained till the change of religion when all was destroyed; not as Alban Butler says ‘Privately rescued from the plundering mob and carried into Spain to Phillip II and domiciled in the Escurial.’ That the head was in the Scots College at Douay and destroyed by the Revolutionists, is correct. This is also certain that all that now remains of St. Margaret is in the Escurial. But how came it there? When Phillip II of Spain collected all the relics he could, he found amongst others at Venice, those of St. Margaret. It was for many years believed that the entire body of St. Margaret was in the Escurial from an erroneous account circulated by George Conn, a Scottish gentleman who visited the Escurial to learn all he could respecting the relics. He found an altar or chapel in honour of the saint... and concluded that the entire body, save the head, must be there....”

Bishop Gillis was summoned to Rome to assist at the canonisation of the Japanese Martyrs on Pentecost Sunday of 1862. He presented reports of the state of the Eastern District to Propaganda Fide (Scotland being Mission territory at the time). He was received by Pius IX several times. The Bishop asked the Pope for a Brief to remove from the Escorial the relics of St Margaret if the Queen of Spain gave her assent. Bishop Gillis had applied for the Brief in 1847 but it was not given until his trip to Rome on 1862 and private audience with the Pope. Having obtained the Brief, Gillis travelled to Spain to seek the Queen’s permission to initiate a search of the Escorial for the relics which were believed to be enshrined there. Queen Isabella II and King Ferdinand received Gillis and granted permission. A Spanish Royal Decree, dated 19th August 1862 was in favour of Bishop Gillis:-

“Her Majesty the Queen has been pleased to authorise Your Excellency (President of the Escurial) to deliver to the Bishop of Edinburgh a portion of the relics of St. Margaret which are preserved in the monastery of the Escurial; which command I submit to your Excellent to carry into effect.”

The relics had been scattered during the Peninsular War and Gillis experienced much difficulty in his search. He discovered two paintings (panels of a triptych altar piece) of Margaret and Malcolm and wished to bring them back to Scotland but was not allowed to.
Two chests were found, one marked with St Margaret's name and one with Malcolm's and it was from this chest that the relic was removed. It is a bone of the shoulder of St. Margaret, seven inches in length by five and a half inches in breadth.

A Certificate of the Escorial states:—

“I certify that on 23rd August, 1862, in virtue of a Royal Decree, I handed over to Bishop Gillies the greater part of the relic entered in the Manuscripts of Phillip II of St. Margaret and I caused the Seal of the Monastery to be affixed to it as an authenticated relic – Dionysius Gonzales”
Dionysius Gonzales provides a list of his qualifications, titles and offices. The essence of the document is:-

I swear that in Book 4, page 15, which lists the relics of the saints which were housed in the Escorial monastery church, founded by Philip II of Spain. These relics had been given to Philip II on the 3rd September 1577 by his wife Anna after they had been sent to her from Germany by her mother, the Empress - one shoulder blade of St Margaret 7 fingers in width and 5 and 1/2 fingers in breath.

I also testify that on the larger section of this bone is written 'De Sancta Margareta' and on the other side 'Entrega 4 Folio 15 No 30'.
I also testify that all the relics of St Margaret, Queen of Scotland, whose descriptions are to be found in the monastery’s books, are noted either by her name while other relics with the same name as Margaret are always described with a different name e.g. ‘St Margaret, Virgin and Martyr, of Antioch’. Finally, I confirm that in the presence Frs Palladius Curius and Bernard Campus, chaplains in this monastery, the shoulder bone was carefully detached from the smaller bone with a saw, sealed by me with sealing wax and signed with the monastery’s seal. This relic was sent to Bishop Gillis, who was given authority to take the relic to his diocese of Edinburgh. I certify that I have signed this letter and sent it together under the monastery’s seal: Written at the monastery of St. Lawrence the Escorial 23rd of August 1876. Signed and sealed Dionysius Gonzales

A further document of authentication exists dating from 1938.

The substance of what Andrew Joseph, Archbishop of St. Andrews and Edinburgh, wrote is: To the greater glory of Almighty God and the veneration of the saints, we inform you and all those who read this letter, that we have examined the relics of the shoulder blade of St. Margaret, Queen of Scotland and which were kept in the monastery of St. Margaret, under the scrupulous care of the Ursuline Nuns. These relics were taken from sacred places and reverently put in a gold oval case, adorned with diamonds, secured and tied with a red silk cord. They were sealed with the See of St. Andrews and Edinburgh. We have recorded these things, together with permission to display them in public for veneration by the faithful in any church, oratory or chapel in our diocese. In verification of this we have sent this letter, written in our own hand and certified with our seal. From our Cathedral at Edinburgh on the 12th of May 1938.

+ Andrew Joseph OSB.
Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh
The relic had been “in the scrupulous care of the Ursuline Nuns” after being brought from Spain by Bishop Gillis on 28th October, 1862. It was presented by him to St. Margaret’s Convent, founded 1834, the first post-Reformation convent in Scotland.

As Apostolic Vicar of the Eastern District of Scotland Bishop Gillis had wanted a convent and school built to cater for the Catholics in Edinburgh and the Ursulines had taken on this task. The term Ursulines refers to a number of religious institutes of the Catholic Church. The best known group was founded in 1535 at Brescia, Italy, by St. Angela Merici (c.1474–1540), for the education of girls and the care of the sick and needy. Their patron saint is Saint Ursula. In 1886 the relic was removed from the cedar box where it had lain under the Bishop’s seal since its journey from Spain and was enshrined in a suitable reliquary designed by Bishop Gillis.
The reliquary in which it was placed was made by Westren, of Frederick Street, Edinburgh. The design is Gothic. The relic is enclosed in a crystal cylinder, and is surrounded with elegant pinnacles; surmounting the relic is a small statue of St. Margaret; this and other parts of the reliquary is studded with precious stones. The base of the reliquary is provided with a receptacle for the authentications of the relic. In 1986, the Ursulines left the Convent which became the Gillis Centre. On 16th November 2008, the relic of St. Margaret which had been in their care was handed to St. Margaret’s Memorial Church in Dunfermline.

The return of a shoulder bone of St. Margaret from the Escurial did not bring an end to the search for her relics. The matter remained of the fate of her head which had been in the Scots College of Douai. Samuel Cowan contacted the Escurial in 1910, producing the following response:

“I beg to inform you that the only relics of Queen Margaret existing at the Escurial at this date consist in the bone of her back, seven fingers long and five and a half fingers broad. Certainly St. Margaret’s head in the silver casket is not at the Escurial, or at least, if it is, it is lost, which is not admissible.”

Mr. Cowan was not easily discouraged. He wrote a letter to “The Tablet”, published on 21st October 1911. “THE RELICS OF ST. MARGARET OF SCOTLAND.

SIR,—May I take the liberty of appealing to the Catholic world for information on this subject through the medium of your widely circulated paper?
When Queen Margaret (wife of Malcolm III) was canonised in 1250, it is believed the head for permanent preservation was removed from the body and reverently enclosed in a silver casket adorned with jewels. Whether or not this operation took place in 1250, I am unable to say authoritatively. At that date the body was disentombed at Dunfermline and placed in a new resting-place there specially prepared for it. It was a great national function, the King and leading nobles and clergy of Scotland heading a huge procession of the people. The circumstances attending the removal of the body afterwards from Dunfermline are not recorded. Philip II, King of Spain, who lived and died in the sixteenth century and built the magnificent palace and monastery of the Escurial, one of the largest buildings known to exist, and containing, it is said, 1,000...
apartments, succeeded when travelling on the Continent in securing the relics of Queen Margaret, but not the head.”

(He continues with Papebroch’s account of the taking of the head from Edinburgh to the Scots College, Douai and its disappearance during the French Revolution.)

“So far as I am aware it has never since been heard of. The narrative of this writer has never been challenged; and I am of opinion that, while it may be strictly accurate, the precious and priceless relic may, at the riots which disgraced France at the Revolution, have found its way into the safe-keeping of a Catholic family, and may at this moment be in absolute security in the archives or lock-fast places of some French, Italian, or English Catholic family, banded down by their ancestors, who were fortunate in securing it from wanton destruction and from the grasp of a furious and riotous mob.

Assuming this to be the case, I appeal with great respect to the Catholic world to send such contributions in writing either to the Editor of this paper or to me calculated to throw light on this mysterious subject, a subject not only of national, but of great historical importance; and should the relic be in safe-keeping, I hope this communication will not escape the notice of its custodian or possessor.

I am, Sir, &c.,
SAMUEL COWAN, (Historian of Queen Margaret). 33, Fountainhall Road, Edinburgh, October 16.

It would seem than this appeal did not produce any useful information. The mystery of the head remained.

St. Margaret has inspired a number of major events since her relic’s return to Scotland in 1862. The celebration of the Golden Jubilee of St. Margaret’s Convent took place, having been postponed from 1884. “The Tablet” of 19th June, 1886 reported that:— “Among those taking part in the ceremonial of the festival were the Most Rev. Dr. Smith, Archbishop of St. Andrews and Edinburgh, the Most Rev. Dr. Eyre, Archbishop of Glasgow, the Canons of the Cathedral Chapter, and a large number of the clergy of the archdiocese, as well as several priests from other parts of Scotland, and representatives of religious orders. St. Margaret’s Convent was the first religious house established in Scotland since the Reformation. The event of June 10th was, therefore, not only the commemoration of the Jubilee of St. Margaret’s, but a solemn thanksgiving for the restoration of religious orders to Scotland. This great work was inaugurated by the late Bishop Gillis. Preceding this service a procession took place, at which the relic of St. Margaret was carried by the Archbishop through the grounds and chapel, and was afterwards deposited on an altar specially prepared for its reception.”

On 24th November, 1894 “The Tablet” recorded:—
“ST. MARGARET’S MEMORIAL CHURCH, DUNFERMLINE.
LAYING THE CORNER STONE
On Thursday, November 16, the corner stone of the great St. Margaret’s Memorial Church, which is being erected by the Catholics of Scotland in Dunfermline, was laid amidst great pomp and splendour. The Church is from plans by Dr. Rowand Anderson, Edinburgh.....The tower is finished with a conical stone roof. In the meantime it is not intended to complete the Church beyond the nave, but the total cost when the building is finished will probably not be short of £30,000”

Drawing on the website of St. Margaret’s Memorial Church we learn how the church came to be built, largely due to the efforts of Father George Mullan, an apostolic missionary priest who served Dunfermline between 1889 and 1903. He is described as “a man of sensitivity and drive, a practical resourceful man whose single-mindedness was to prove greatly to the advantage of his growing congregation.” First he wiped out the debt occasioned by his predecessors’ building of the modest chapel-school in 1873. Next Father Mullan set about his visionary project: the building of a National Memorial Church of St. Margaret to replace the chapel-school which was considered ‘disappointing’ and unworthy of Dunfermline’s Catholics and of their great Saint, Margaret. The Marquess of Bute generously funded the drawing up of plans by the architect, Dr Rowan Anderson. These began so lavishly that they had to be revised three times before a project of manageable proportions could be agreed. Despite generous donations from Father Mullan himself and his family, the people of Dunfermline and of the nation, the clergy and the nobility, money could not
found for the building of the transepts and the apse....and a debt of £3,000 was left outstanding. The laying of the marble foundation stone (paid for by Lord Bute) took place on St Margaret’s Day, 16th November 1894. The stone was laid by Lady Margaret, wife of the Marquess of Bute.

Two years later on 17th June 1896, the octave day of St Margaret’s Feast, St Margaret’s Memorial Church was solemnly opened for worship by His Grace Archbishop MacDonald of St Andrews and Edinburgh. Pontifical High Mass was sung by the Right Rev Dr Smith of Dunkeld. The "Dunfermline Saturday Press" gave an account of the elaborate ceremonial of the High Mass:

"With the first low bars of the Stately Mass, the impressive ceremony began .... Father Mullan was Master of Ceremonies ... The Chapter of St. Andrews and Edinburgh was represented by most of the Canons, and a large body of clergy were present. The proceedings throughout were of the most elaborate description. The stirring music, the continual passing to and fro of gorgeously robed priests, the swaying of the incense and the glimmering lights of the waxen tapered candles on the altar combined to form a scene both radiant and fascinating.... from beginning to end the Ceremony was entirely successful..... The Church was crowded in every part by a congregation whose interest was sustained for nearly three hours by one of the most striking and impressive religious functions ever witnessed in Dunfermline."

The sermon was preached by Father James McGuinness of St. Patrick's Edinburgh. He went on to extol the virtues of St Margaret: her piety, her devotion to learning and to education, her charitable works among the poor. On an ecumenical note he drew attention to the rapprochement taking place between Protestant and Catholic historians of the day praising the “honest researches of Protestant historians” in recognising the Catholic tradition.

On 10th June 1899 the first Annual Pilgrimage to Dunfermline in honour of St. Margaret took place.

“The time was now ripe for the graces showered upon Dunfermline's Catholics through the intercession of St Margaret to bring forth the sweetest fruit. Even the newly-built railways were pressed into the service of the Saint. The Victorian pilgrims left Edinburgh by steam train at 9.10am. Rosary and Litany of Our Lady were recited during the journey. Pilgrims heard mass at 10am in the beautiful new Church of St Margaret. After mass the Veni Creator was sung and there was an address by Monsignor McKerrell. Next there was a solemn procession to St Margaret's cave where the Litany of the Saints was recited and a hymn to St Margaret sung. Another solemn procession took pilgrims to St Margaret’s Tomb where they again recited the Rosary and sang ‘Faith of our Fathers'. Benediction took place in the Chapel of the Sisters of Charity nearby before pilgrims boarded the train once more at the Lower Station. Another Rosary and Litany were recited on the train. It was truly a pilgrimage in the spirit of those medieval ones but it had taken four long centuries to reinstate it.”

The website goes on to explain that 1930 saw the revival of the Pilgrimages on a grand scale. With the encouragement and support of the Archbishops and Bishops of Scotland and the organisation of the Catholic Truth Society, the Pilgrimage became a national event attracting between eight and ten thousand people when held in November but twenty thousand in June. The National Memorial Church could no longer accommodate the pilgrims for Mass and so began the co-operation with the Dunfermline Athletic Football Club.
“The Tablet” of 19th June 1937 contains a report entitled “A DUNFERMLINE PILGRIMAGE”. It states:

“About ten thousand Catholics, from all parts of the country, made pilgrimage to Dunfermline on Sunday, June 13th, to honour St. Margaret of Scotland. The pilgrimage was led by the Archbishop of St. Andrews and Edinburgh, Metropolitan in Scotland. For the first time since the inauguration of the pilgrimage, pilgrims from Ireland formed part of the assembly. A group of boys in uniform from H.M.S. Caledonia, the naval training-ship at Rosyth, were a feature in the procession from the railway station to the East End Park, where High Mass, Coram Archiepiscopo, was celebrated by Fr. Michael Bruce, of St. Peter’s, Edinburgh. The Right Rev. Bishop Graham was also present. The preacher, the Rt. Rev. Mgr. Canon McHardy (Ayr) dwelt on St. Margaret’s life and work, and on the early days of Catholic Scotland.”

A 1957 letter to all parish priests from Gordon J. Gray, Archbishop of St. Andrews and Edinburgh, shows the importance attached to this pilgrimage. This was to be read in all churches after mass. The pilgrimage was described as the only national event for Catholics. Although attendance would involve “no small inconvenience and sacrifice”, the Archbishop was confident that there would be a “considerable participation from each parish in this diocese”. He expressed the desire that this Pilgrimage would “bring nearer the return of Scotland to the true Faith”.

The effort involved in organising such events must have been enormous. A letter dated May 1961 from John Boyle asks for information on the number of buses expected from each parish and sets out the requirements of the police. He stated that the Right Reverend Monsignor Delaney will be pleased to offer his hospitality to Clergy after the mass.

In 1993 at St. Margaret’s R.C. Memorial Church, Dunfermline an entire year of celebrations were organised during Father Barr’s ministry to mark the 900th anniversary of the Saint’s death.

The church’s website explains:-
St Margaret’s Pilgrim People expanded to include people from all walks of life. Father Barr observed afterwards:

[Photo of Archbishop and others]
"As it turned out all our plans proved to be far too humble and low key.... in our Procession of Pilgrims we would include people from high and low estate; HRH Princess Margaret; The Lord High Commissioner; The Moderator of the Church of Scotland; the Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church; the late Cardinal Gray; the President of the Scottish Catholic Bishops; Abbots, Bishops as well as many parishes and organisations. Over 15,000 pilgrims came to visit St Margaret’s Cave, Dunfermline Abbey and St Margaret’s Shrine and to our National Memorial Church where they venerated the Relic of St Margaret."

Events included three televised services from St Margaret's Memorial Church, each on a theme connected with St Margaret’s Life: her tending of the sick; her love of children and her care of the poor. An Ecumenical service was held in Dunfermline Abbey.

The beautiful Memorial Church of St Margaret now has a historic rose window to commemorate the 900th anniversary of her death. The window depicts Margaret in the centre as Queen and Saint holding her Book of the Gospels and the Holy Rood."

A most significant event occurred in 2008 with the translation of the holy relic from the Ursuline Sisters to the care of the St. Margaret’s National Memorial Church. The return of the relic of St. Margaret of Scotland to Dunfermline took place on her Feast Day, the 16th November.

The Solemn Celebration of Mass by Cardinal Keith O’Brien took place in St Margaret’s National Memorial Church. Guests of honour were the Ursuline Sisters to whose care Bishop Gillis had entrusted the relic of the saint 145 years previously and from whose hands Father David Barr and his parishioners were to receive the reliquary with its shoulder bone of the saint. Both Father Barr and Cardinal O’Brien thanked the nuns warmly for their curatorship of the precious relic. The Cardinal officiated with his usual warm spirituality. The Scripture readings focussed on Margaret’s virtues: the “perfect wife”, the embodiment of Christian love and the example to all of us, in these material times, of compassion for the poor. The Cardinal reminded the congregation of the pilgrimages to Dunfermline, only discontinued relatively recently, in which the reliquary, brought from Edinburgh, would be carried in procession through the streets of the city to the football ground for mass, so many were the pilgrims who came to pay her homage. Now pilgrims might return to her final resting place, the beautiful new shrine prepared for her in the Lady Chapel of her own Memorial Church. The gothic-style reliquary is complemented in the Chapel by an exquisitely modelled bronze of St Margaret, specially commissioned from the sculptor, Anne Davidson DA ARBS.
The Parish Priest of St. Margaret’s, Father Chris Heenan, was kind enough to respond to our inquiry as to why the national pilgrimage, to which so much importance had been attached, ended in 1974. He could not find any documentary evidence relating to its curtailment. Even after consultation with a local historian he could say little more than “all is conjecture”. One possibility is that the event, involving in excess of ten thousand people, was thought to be too large to be managed safely. However, the pilgrimage was to make a return.

An account was given in by Leeza Clarke in “TheCourier.co.uk”, 7th May, 2015
“Ancient pilgrimage celebrating St Margaret revived.”

The new pilgrimage in honour of St Margaret was launched at Dunfermline Abbey. Archbishop Leo Cushley of St Andrews and Edinburgh launched the new pilgrimage in honour of the country’s patroness. It would be the first time in more than four decades that such an event has been held in Dunfermline, the queen’s resting place. The roots of the summer pilgrimage actually date back to June 1250 when the relics of Saint Margaret were moved to a new shrine in Dunfermline Abbey, following her canonisation that year. An annual summer pilgrimage to Dunfermline soon emerged and continued until the late 16th Century. It was then revived in 1899 and continued again until 1974. The resurrected pilgrimage, “In the Footsteps of St Margaret” was to take place in Dunfermline on Sunday June 28th. The Archbishop said:- “This will be a real family event to which everybody in Scotland is invited, given that St Margaret is an inspirational figure for all Scots, as well as a heavenly protectress of the people of our land.”

This proved to be a great success, as recorded in the “Catholic Herald” of June 29th. More than a thousand people had taken part in a pilgrimage to honour St Margaret, the 11th-century Queen of Scots. Archbishop Leo Cushley of St Andrews and Edinburgh carried aloft the saint’s relics through the streets of Dunfermline on Sunday accompanied by a school pipe band. The St Margaret pilgrimage dates back to the 13th century but this year was the first time it had been held since 1974. The Archbishop said “I was really gobsmacked by the turnout I was thrilled – absolutely delighted.”

Archbishop Leo Cushley was head of the English-language section of the Vatican Secretariat of State from 2009 until 2013. In his homily during mass at the conclusion of St. Margaret’s Pilgrimage he made the following remarks about St. Margaret of Scotland and Pope Francis I “Is she like Mother Theresa? Is she like Margaret Thatcher? Who is she like? I couldn’t come up with anyone except for one person, and it’s a man, and this may seem odd but bear with me for a minute – I think it is Pope Francis….Why Pope Francis? Well, he is someone – and I know this because I used to work for him – who is personally very self-disciplined. He takes the Christian life and the virtues of the Christian life very seriously. He works hard at being a Christian. He does it quietly. He does it privately….But when you meet Pope Francis and when you see him and when you hear him. He is someone who is filled with the love of Jesus Christ and who encourages people to do the right thing by loving them – and I think Margaret was like that too.”
The links between the cult of Queen Margaret and the Papacy have been considerable. She was canonised by the Pope Innocent IV in 1250, the only Scots Queen to be declared a Saint. In 1673 she was declared Patroness of Scotland by Pope Clement X. In his pastoral visit to Scotland on Tuesday, 1st June 1982, Pope John Paul II referred to St. Margaret in his homily during mass at Bellahouston Park, Glasgow. He said:
"Dear sons and daughters of the Catholic Church in Scotland! Dearly beloved in Christ! What response has Scotland given in the past to God’s invitation? After the Dark Ages had passed, during which the Viking invasions failed to quench the light of the Faith, the coming of Queen Margaret inaugurated a new chapter in the history of the Church in Scotland, which received fresh vigour from internal reorganization and from closer contact with the universal Church. Although situated geographically on the remote edge of Europe, the Church in Scotland became especially dear to the Popes, at the centre and heart of Christianity, and they conferred upon it the exceptional title Specialis Filia Romanæ Ecclesiae, ‘Special Daughter of the Roman Church’. What a magnificent designation!"

On his state visit to the United Kingdom, Pope Benedict XVI also referred to her in his homily during mass at Bellahouston Park, Glasgow, on the 16th September 2010.

"Saint Ninian, whose feast we celebrate today, was himself unafraid to be a lone voice. In the footsteps of the disciples whom our Lord sent forth before him, Ninian was one of the very first Catholic missionaries to bring his fellow Britons the good news of Jesus Christ....That work was later taken up by Saint Mungo, Glasgow’s own patron, and by other saints, the greatest of whom must include Saint Columba and Saint Margaret. Inspired by them, many men and women have laboured over many centuries to hand down the faith to you. Strive to be worthy of this great tradition! Let the exhortation of Saint Paul in the first reading be your constant inspiration: “Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering and persevere in prayer” (cf. Rom 12:11-12). “

In a review of Samuel Cowan’s book, “Life of Princess Margaret, Queen of Scotland, 1070-1093”, “The Spectator” of 30th September 1911 came to the conclusion “Mr. Cowan has done as well with a difficult subject as could reasonably be expected.” In the introduction to this paper we said “that the intention of the present authors is primarily to explore the fate of her relics and to record her commemoration in recent years”. We hope that readers will be at least as generous as “The Spectator” in assessing our efforts.

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David W. Atherton
and
Michael P. Peyton
March 2016
The 2015 Pilgrimage
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The photograph on the cover is of the sculpture of St. Margaret of Scotland in the Jesuit Church of the Immaculate Conception, Mount Street, London. It was constructed by Charles Whiffen, chiefly from various types of marble. The cross in the Saint’s hands is of Irish bog-oak.

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