

ÁGNES KERÉKJÁRTÓ – GYULA KLIMA

HOLINESS AND ASCETICISM: SAINT MARGARET OF HUNGARY (1242–1270)

“She was locked up, as is customary, in the cloister
inhabited by the bodiless sisters of the
Order of Preachers [the Dominican order].”¹
(The Legend of Margaret, Life of Saint Margaret 1510)²

Oblatio puerorum

Saint Margaret of Hungary was born on 27 January 1242, at a time when Hungary was in desperate need of exemplary personalities. She was the ninth child King Béla IV of Hungary (1206-1270) and the Byzantine imperial princess Maria Laskarina (1206-1270), during the Mongol invasion. Her birth was preceded

-
- 1 The phrase “bodiless sisters” is a translation error, but it is pertinent as a historical “Freudian slip”. In monastic parlance, the term “sorores incorporatae” referred to the sisters registered (“incorporated”) in the cloister, although “incorporata”, can also mean “incorporeal”, “disembodied”, “bodiless”.
 - 2 All quotations of the legend in this study have been taken from Lea Ráskai’s *Legend of Margaret*. The texts have been taken from the digital version with modernised spelling produced at the University of Debrecen: https://deba.unideb.hu/deba/Margit-legenda_Szent_Margit_elete_1510/index.html

by tragic historical and family events. On 11 April 1241, the country perished at the Battle of Muhi. King Béla was forced to flee for his life on horseback and sought help from the Austrian Prince Frederick of Babenberg (1211-1246). However, instead of ensuring protection, Frederick robbed and blackmailed him. After his ally's betrayal, Béla, his wife, six daughters and his son Stephen set off for Zagreb. On the way, her younger brother, Prince Kálmán, died of the grave injuries he had sustained at Muhi. The heroic prince was buried in secret in the Dominican monastery of Mary Magdalene in Chazma [Čazma, Croatia].³ Protected by the rest of his faithful, Béla continued his journey towards the Adriatic Sea, the army of Kadan Khan pursuing him. Finally, he took his family to safety in the rock fortress of Klissza (today: Klis, Croatia) in Dalmatia. Here, an outbreak of the bubonic plague took the lives of their two daughters, thirteen-year-old Catherine and St. Margaret's namesake, sixteen year old Margaret. They were laid to rest in a single stone coffin in the cathedral of Spalato (today: Split, Croatia). Under the dark shadow of their country's ruination as the queen was expecting their ninth child, they vowed to dedicate their unborn child, if a girl, to God in thanks for the deliverance of themselves and Hungary.

In early 1242, the royal couple had a daughter, whom they named Margaret after her deceased sister.⁴ Shortly afterwards, events in Hungary took an unexpected turn: the Mongols suddenly withdrew and left the country. Béla IV hurried home to begin rebuilding, while his wife and children followed him to Hungary a few months later.

The parents kept their promise: In 1246, at the age of three, they sent their daughter Margaret to the monastery of Saint Catherine in Veszprém, where she was educated for seven years, and in 1252 she was transferred with seventeen of her fellow nuns to the monastery of the Blessed Virgin Mary, founded for her on the Island of Rabbits (Nyulak szigete) in Buda.

3 Hungarian Catholic Encyclopaedia online: Csázma, <http://lexikon.katolikus.hu/C/Cs%C3%A1zma.html>

4 Both princesses were named after Saint Margaret of Antioch, who was highly revered in Hungary and throughout Europe at the time.

<p>“Vt tamen aliquo modo reuerencie, quam erga ipsam nostram dominam Virginem gerimus Gloriosam, exhibeamus expressius argumentum; filiam nostram karissimam dominam Margaretam inter sorores in ipso Monasterio sub religiosi habitus honestate Domini nostri et Genitricis eiusdem, Regine Celestis, studuimus obsequijs deputare, vt uirginis uocis organo laudet uirginem, et a matre misericordie misericordiam satagat implorare. Verum quia religiosam uitam ducentibus congrua debemus consideratione prospicere, ne cuiuslibet necessitatis occasio pro defectu temporalium, sine quibus spiritualia in hoc mortali corpore non subsistunt, robur sancte in eis contemplacionis dissoluat; contulimus, dedimus et donauimus eidem Monasterio Matris Regine Celestis in perpetuam elemosinam villas, quarum nomina ilico subiiciuntur.”⁵</p>	<p>“However, to give somehow more express evidence of the reverence with which we worship the Glorious Virgin, we have chosen our dearest daughter, Lady Margaret, to dwell among the Sisters of the Monastery, in the honour of religious garments, to the service of Our Lord and of Her Mother, the Queen of Heaven, that she may praise the Virgin with the instrument of her virginal voice, and seek to beg mercy from the Mother of Mercy. But since we must give due attention to those who live the monastic life, lest, in the absence of earthly goods, without which spiritual goods cannot be preserved in this mortal body, some necessity should occasion the relaxation of the austerity of their holy contemplation, we grant, give, and bestow the villages below as perpetual alms to the monastery of the Mother of the Heavenly King.”⁶</p>
---	---

In that year the General Chapter of the Dominican Order of Bologna designated Buda as the site of the next *capitulum generale*.⁷ This choice was a great tribute to Béla IV for his ecclesiastical policy in favour of the Dominicans, and also an expression of respect for the deep religiousness of the royal couple. In 1254, the chapter was held in the convent of Buda, where Princess Margaret took her first vows, after which she lived her life as a Dominican nun until her death.

In the early Middle Ages, this kind of offering of children, the so-called *oblatio puerorum*, was common and generally accepted, following the biblical

5 Wenzel 1873, p. 319, pp. 458–459

6 The translation of the Latin texts into Hungarian, with the exception of Saint Margaret’s chant, was produced by Gyula Klima.

7 Kertész 2017, p. 7

example of the prophet Samuel. Early offerings were considered irrevocable.⁸ By the time of Béla IV, however, this had changed, and the parental promise no longer bound the child for life; instead, it allowed the child to decide over his or her own fate as an adolescent.⁹ It is important to emphasise this fact to show that Margaret's life was not shaped by compulsion, or merely by obeying her parents' will. As she grew up, she would have been free to choose to leave the convent, according to the Church's rules in force. But she did not, as we know from the surviving texts on her life.

Narrative sources

We know relatively little about the life of Saint Margaret of Hungary. The Latin records of two successive sainthood investigations initiated shortly after her death are of great value. The first record was written between 1271 and 1274,¹⁰ and it was sent to Pope Innocent V in 1275, who determined that the material collected was not sufficient for the canonisation of Margaret.¹¹ However, the text started its own life because there were others besides the Pope who read, interpreted and further reflected on it. It was thanks to these readers of the period that the testimonies, recorded almost immediately after Margaret's death, were not lost to posterity but were incorporated into later legends, such as the *Legenda vetus* of the 1270s, also known as the Marcellus legend after its author.¹² Friar Marcellus, who was then the head of the Hungarian Dominican Order, was not only the author but also a character in the legend. As Margaret's confessor and spiritual guide, he was personally involved in carrying through a successful canonisation process, and was therefore certainly familiar with the record of the first investigation, which has since been lost. He wrote the story of Margaret's life on the basis of this record and his own recollections to facilitate

8 De Jong 1996, p. 192

9 De Jong 1996, p. 193

10 Pongrácz 1943, pp. 1037–1043

11 Bóle 1944, pp. 5–15

12 Csepregi et al. 2018

the canonisation of his spiritual disciple.¹³ He follows the chronological scheme of a *hagiography*, emphasising Margaret's special virtues and describing her miraculous deeds.

In 1278, during the second sainthood investigation, another record in Latin was drawn up, in which 40 of Margaret's fellow nuns recall the miraculous events of her life with the vividness of personal experience. Here, the distance between the author and the saint is somewhat greater in time, but even this text, like the other two mentioned above, is a product of short-term memory and based on the testimony of contemporaries and eyewitnesses.

The legend in Hungarian

The legend of Marcellus and the second record were further passed down into the Hungarian-language legend of Saint Margaret, which survives from 1510. The original Latin script from which the translation was made has not yet been identified by philological research. However, we do know¹⁴ that the copyist, and possibly also translator, of the text was Lea Ráskai, a later fellow nun of Saint Margaret's. At the beginning of the 16th century, Lea Ráskai was the most important copyist and librarian of the *scriptorium*, the copy workshop at the monastery of Margaret Island. Her library was the cradle of Hungarian literature.

Ráskai made minor changes to the text, which reveal her personal involvement: she identified the monastic settings of the text – reflecting 13th-century conditions – with the monastic settings of her own time. In doing so, she also emphasised that Saint Margaret had lived in the monastery on the island and was one of them, thereby bringing her closer to her fellow nuns to follow as a role model. The text was written for community use, presumably for

13 This is exactly what happened with Saint Elizabeth of the Árpád dynasty as well. Her confessor, Conrad of Marburg, wrote the *Summa vitae* and sent it to the Pope with a list of miracles to ask for the canonisation of the deceased, which was granted in 1235, four years after Elizabeth's death.

14 Her name was found by György Volf at the end of the 19th century on page 368 of the *Cornides Codex*. Nyelvelmléktár VIII. Budapest, 1879. Előszó, IX.

community reading. Ráskai accompanies the narration of the life story with enthusiastic exclamations, sighs, and exhortations for good deeds addressed to her fellow nuns, thus complying with the decision of the Grand Chapter held in London in 1335 that the biography of the saints should be written in a fervent style, not as a dry set of data. It is assumed that the body of Blessed Margaret was removed from her tomb around 1510, around the time the Hungarian legend was written, because the sanctuary of the church on the island had been rebuilt and the tomb was placed behind the sanctuary.¹⁵ This is confirmed by Lea Ráskai in one of her interpolations, when she says of Margaret's tomb on the island¹⁶: "in which now this holy virgin still lies". The relocation was probably necessary because Margaret's tomb had become a cult site immediately after her death, and was visited by a large number of pilgrims.

The Hungarian forerunner of asceticism and sanctity of life: Saint Andrew Zorard

The legend of Saint Margaret of Hungary suggests that denial of the body was of paramount importance in her religiosity. The idea that the ascent of the soul to God is hindered by the earthbound, fallible nature of the human body is not unfamiliar to modern man either. Yet the kind of almost bodiless existence that unfolds in the legends of Saint Margaret of Hungary is strange to us. Researchers into the life of Saint Margaret have tried to dispel this strangeness with various explanations. Elemér Mályusz sees in Margaret the first Hungarian representative of medieval mysticism,¹⁷ while László Mezey associates her with *Beguine* religiousness, which did not fully coincide with the official ecclesiastical conception, especially that of the Dominican order.¹⁸

15 Feurené Tóth 1971, p. 249, p. 251

16 According to the legend, her first tomb was made of red marble by Lombardy craftsmen.

17 Mályusz 1933, p. 39

18 Mezey 1955, p. 25

All this aversion, however, is perhaps a peculiarity only of our secular age. It is therefore legitimate to ask to what extent Saint Margaret's ascetic religiosity was unique in her time.

Perhaps a good point of reference is the example of the first ascetic saint canonised in Hungary, Saint Andrew Zorard, whose canonisation was initiated by László I in 1083, and who won the respect of his contemporaries precisely by the extreme denial and mortification of his body.¹⁹

A copper engraving from 1620 shows Zoerard's self-mortification in full detail.²⁰ During the forty days of Lent, Zoerard took only forty walnuts for his food. He sat for entire days and nights on a tree stump surrounded by sharp reed thorns, and hung stones from a tree trunk around his head so that he would not ever be in the mood to lie down for sleep. His cilice, or penitential belt, was an iron chain that over the years had become so embedded in his flesh that skin grew around it, and legend has it that when it was removed from his corpse, it could be heard grinding against his ribs. The final line of the etching's inscription ends with a question that, accordingly, is literally cutting into the flesh:

<p>“Haec toti Zoerarde orbi spectacula praebes Perdius et pernox sic Zoerarde sedes Cum pigro tam saeva geris certamina somno Si tu sic dormis, quis vigilare potest?”</p>	<p>“There, Zoerard, these are the spectacles thou offer to this world. Thou keep sitting thusly, Zoerard, through all day and night, bringing such fierce torments onto idle sleep. If thou sleep thus, who can be awake?”</p>
---	--

19 Zoerard's hagiography is preserved in the work of Blessed Mór, Bishop of Pécs, written around 1064-1070. For reference, see the following note.

20 Jean le Clerc: Saint Andrew Zoerard, 1620. Based upon the work of Martin de Vos and Jan Sadeler. Copper etching, paper, 24.1 × 19.2 cm. A reproduction of the copper engraving can be found in the following study: Ilkó 2012, pp. 33–44. According to the study, the etching is the property of the author of the study. Unfortunately, the author did not provide permission to reproduce the image in this study.

The obvious answer to the question is that we sleep even when we are awake compared to Zoerard's wakefulness; our consciousness compared to his is like the consciousness of Plato's cave-dwellers compared to that of those living on the surface. The similarity with Plato's thought is not a coincidence. Zoerard's cultural background was in fact the tradition of Greek hermits who, in the spirit of a "baptised Platonism", continued their ascetic practices to free the soul from the body in this lifetime.²¹

Asceticism and holiness of life according to Thomas Aquinas

But would the same mentality have guided the ascetic practice of a Dominican nun? After all, by Margaret's time, Thomas Aquinas' Aristotelian theological anthropology posited a much more intimate metaphysical union between body and soul, and also, based on theological considerations, he gave the union of body and soul a much more important role than Platonic spirituality.

From a metaphysical point of view, the unity of body and soul is not like the unity of, say, a hand puppet and the hand that moves it, or, in Aristotle's example often cited by Thomas, like the unity of a ship and its pilot. For this unity is merely a unity of cooperation, not of existence. This is the reason why, in the Platonic understanding, the soul, separated in its existence, is merely the occasionally reluctant mover of the body, while the body is often an obstacle to, rather than a helper of, the soul's own spiritual mode of being, which the soul, enclosed in the body and struggling through earthly existence, had better deny even in this world in its preparation for a purely spiritual existence after the death of the body.

By contrast, in Aquinas' Aristotelian conception, the soul is a substantial form of the body; in itself an incomplete part of an existentially unified,

21 See more on this in Krisztina Ilkó's study cited above.

complete being. The soul is therefore in its natural place in the body, in which it fulfils the functions of its natural material powers (such as its vegetative and sensory powers) through the body's organs. But, uniquely in material nature, the human soul also possesses a purely spiritual power of its own, the human intellect, whose activity, thinking, is not the activity of any bodily organ, not even the brain, which merely supplies the sensory data necessary for thinking.²² Its existence therefore enables the human soul to survive the death of the body, since it can continue to function without the existence of any bodily organ but, in order to continue this function, it must exist. This existence, however, is no longer the existence of the whole human person, but of a purely intellectual part of the person. In the earthly life of the complete human person, the body is therefore not the prison of the soul, but the completion of its material powers, and thus the natural place of the soul. This point has very important theological implications.

First, if the human soul, separated from the body, is not in its natural place, it naturally longs for reunion with the body, the resurrection of the body. And this is precisely the promise of Christ's resurrection; it is the faith in the fulfilment of this promise that is expressed in the Apostles' Creed.

Second, and in direct connection with asceticism, if the soul is the natural place of the body and thus a gift of nature's Creator, then it is not to be destroyed but nurtured.

But, of course, nurturing the body does not mean that all its desires should be satisfied, nor that it is not necessary to subject both body and soul to trials for their training. After all, Aquinas was no stranger to the idea of testing the body as a path to spirituality. As he writes:

22 This last statement is not self-evident, of course, and thus requires proof. See more on this: Klima 2016, pp. 49–75

“Manifestum namque est quod humanum cor tanto intensius in aliquid unum fertur, quanto magis a multis revocatur. Sic igitur tanto perfectius animus hominis ad Deum diligendum fertur, quanto magis ab affectu temporalium removetur. Unde Augustinus dicit in libro LXXXIII quaestionum quod venenum caritatis est cupiditas temporalium rerum, augmentum vero eius est cupiditatis diminutio; perfectio vero nulla cupiditas. Omnia igitur consilia, quibus ad perfectionem invitamur, ad hoc pertinent ut animus hominis ab affectu temporalium avertatur, ut sic liberius mens tendat in Deum, contemplando, amando, et eius voluntatem implendo.”

“And it is evident that the human heart is the more strongly attracted to one thing, the more it withdraws from others. Likewise, the more the soul of man is attracted to the love of God, the more it withdraws from the influence of temporal things. This is why Augustine says that the poison of love is the desire for temporal things, and that the growth of love is the diminution of this desire, and its perfection is there being no desire. Every counsel, therefore, which invites perfection, urges us to turn away from the desire for temporal things, so that the mind may turn rather to God, contemplating, loving, and doing his will.”²³

But it is essentially with the same thought that he begins his other polemical writing on the perfection of the monastic life:

“Christianae religionis propositum in hoc praecipue videtur consistere, ut a terrenis homines revocet et spiritualibus faciat esse intentos. Hinc est quod auctor fidei et consummator Iesus, in hunc mundum veniens, saecularium rerum contemptum et facto et verbo suis fidelibus demonstravit.”

“What Christian religion puts forth appears to consist chiefly in calling men away from earthly things, and making them attentive to spiritual things. It is for the same reason that Jesus, the author, and fulfiller of faith, when he came into this world, demonstrated to his followers, by deed and word, his contempt for worldly things.”²⁴

23 De perf. c. 6.

24 Contra doct. c. 1.

Thus, the Thomistic ideal is a *fully human life*, which, in its perfect form, following in the footsteps of Christ, does not find joy in worldly things, but, despising these, turns towards spiritual things, towards the love of God and of our neighbour. Thus, as in so many other matters, Thomas seeks and finds a kind of delicate balance between nature and grace, body and soul, materiality and spirituality, albeit emphasising that this balance, in its perfect form, can be achieved in a spiritual life that denies temporal, corporeal things in three ways: 1) by renouncing external goods, money, wealth, property; 2) by the “mortification” of the body, i.e. fasting and other ascetic practices; and finally, 3) by denying one’s own will (or wilfulness) by totally submitting one’s will to the will of God.

But exactly where, for whom and how this balance is achieved varies from individual to individual and from age to age. Thus, for example, when it comes to the renunciation of earthly goods, Thomas raises the problem that if spiritual perfection consists in abandoning earthly goods, then no one who is wealthy can reach salvation, and so, for example, Abraham, who died rich, could not have entered the kingdom of heaven. This is what he says about the solution to the problem:²⁵

25 De perf. c. 7.

“Quae quidem quaestio solvi non posset, si perfectio Christianae vitae in ipsa dimissione divitiarum consisteret. Sequeretur enim quod qui divitias possidet, non possit esse perfectus. Sed si verba domini diligenter considerentur, non in ipsa divitiarum dimissione perfectionem posuit; sed hoc ostendit esse quasi quandam perfectionis viam, ut ipse modus loquendi ostendit, cum dicitur: si vis perfectus esse, vade, et vende omnia quae habes, et da pauperibus, et sequere me: quasi in sequela Christi consistat perfectio, dimissio vero divitiarum sit perfectionis via. [...] Potest ergo contingere quod aliquis divitias possidens perfectionem habeat, caritate perfecta Deo inhaerens; et hoc modo Abraham divitias possidens perfectus fuit, non quidem habens animum divitiis irretitum, sed totaliter Deo coniunctum. [...] Magna ergo virtus fuit Abrahae quod etiam divitias possidens, a divitiis liberum animum habuit; sicut magna virtus fuit Samson, qui absque armis cum sola mandibula asinae multos hostes prostravit: nec tamen inutiliter consilium datur militi, ut ad bellum procedens assumat arma ad hostes vincendos.”

“This question could not be resolved if the perfection of Christian life consisted in the abandonment of earthly goods. For it would follow that whoever possesses earthly goods cannot be perfect. But if we consider carefully the Lord’s words, we shall see that he did not say that perfection consists in the abandonment of goods, but that the abandonment of goods is a path to perfection, as is proved by his manner of speaking, when he says, ‘If you desire to be perfect, go and sell all you have, and give it to the poor, and come, follow me’; that is, perfection consists in following Christ, and the abandonment of goods is the path to perfection. [...] It is possible, then, to be rich and yet perfect, clinging to God with perfect love, and this is how Abraham was rich and yet perfect, for his soul was not entangled in the net of riches, but was wholly attached to God. [...] Great, then, was the virtue of Abraham, that even though he was rich, his soul was free from riches, as was great the strength of Samson, who, unarmed, slew many enemies only with the jawbone of an ass. Yet, it is not without benefit to the warrior to advise him that when he goes to war, he should arm himself to defeat the enemy.”

Thomas solves the problem of denying carnal pleasures in a similar way, where the problem is caused by Abraham’s polygamy that seems to be in conflict with spiritual perfection.²⁶ For just as it is good advice for the warrior to arm himself in preparation for war, so it is good advice for the one preparing for spiritual life to rid himself of bodily temptations, even though a strong

26 Ibid., c. 8.

soul, like the unarmed Samson, can triumph over them even when exposed to temptation. To this we may add, of course, that to strengthen the soul, it must be trained in the same way as the body. And to whom, when and how much ‘training’ is needed varies from person to person and from age to age. So how was this matter in the case of Margaret?

Margaret’s asceticism and sanctity of life

Margaret’s religiosity can only be understood in this spiritual context. The very centre of women’s religious movements of the 13th century was the ideal of *imitatio Christi*. According to this idea, Christ crucified on the cross shows the way to God, and anyone who wishes to be saved must become like him. Beyond deep compassion, one must share in the sufferings of Christ. The ideal of *imitatio Christi* was set as an example to be followed by all of Margaret’s fellow nuns. Where Margaret goes further is the degree of implementation. Her faith and religious fervour in following the suffering Christ led her, beyond the veneration of the Holy Cross and the profound spiritual experience of the Easter cycle, to an almost total denial of her own bodily needs. How did she achieve this? Her renunciation of earthly goods and privileges is evident in the utter simplicity of her dress, her abstemious eating habits, her humble performance of the most menial tasks, her self-sacrificing care of the sick and her charity. But she goes even further: she never bathes, wears torn and worn clothes, forgoes cleaning her clothes and often her sleep, wears a *cilice* and stockings with nails, and beats herself with a rod, or if she lacks strength, asks others to beat her.

According to legend, Margaret’s confessor and spiritual director, Friar Marcellus, taught her the path to perfection according to a vision he had had. Lea Ráskai describes Marcellus’ vision of “what the perfection of the holy fathers of old had been”:

“There was a friar [Marcellus], a preacher of the monastery, who was at that time a provincial. This provincial often contemplated, and with great piety begged the Lord God that he might be worthy to be shown, to be presented with, what the perfection of the holy fathers of old was, of those who ascended

for His sake to the pinnacle of good works, and to such a great sweet knowledge of the Lord God, as the Scriptures record of them, he said. Therefore, a book was brought and shown to this provincial, written in letters of gold, and the provincial heard the words, “Arise, brother, and read this.” And the friar read, and these things were written in the book: *‘This is the perfection of the holy fathers of old: to love God; to hate oneself; to hate no one; to judge no one.’* And the vision passed away, and the friar awoke from his sleep; and began to recite this lesson often, lest he might forget it.”

The teaching of Marcellus thus suggests the same thing as the contemporary idea of the *imitatio Christi*: renounce earthly goods because they are an obstacle to pure spirituality. Margaret expressed the same idea as follows: “For the cloister is not a dwelling and place of feasts for those who seek the present goods, the goods of this world, but for those who seek the heavenly things to come.”

But, of course, Margaret did not wish everyone to realise holiness in exactly her way. She knew that everyone had their own measure, and she gave her fellow nuns advice accordingly. “She also taught other sorors to this devotion, especially a cantrix named soror Katerina. She was the daughter of the squire András Váradi. This soror often asked this holy virgin to teach her how to worship, serve and pray to God. This holy virgin, Saint Margaret, said to this soror Katerina: ‘Offer your body and your soul to the Lord God, and let your heart be always with the Lord God or facing the Lord God, so that neither death nor any other cause may deprive you of the love of God.’”

That is, she does not say that soror Katerina should wear the penitential belt too, but just that whatever she does, she should have her heart with the Lord God. She does not even tell soror Katerina to pray like she does, because she knows that the way she prays is not for everyone. Because according to legend, this is usually how her prayer happened: “So sweetly did this holy virgin pray at all times, that in whatever very cold time it was, when other sorors went to their rooms to warm themselves after divine service, this holy woman, Margaret, remained in the gallery, only in a robe or a cowl, in the great cold, so that she turned blue all over, as if she were dead. She was often found in this state by the sorors before the altar of the Holy Cross in the gallery. For Saint Margaret was very fond of praying

before the altar of the Holy Cross, because at that time the sacrament, the holy body of Christ, was suspended before the altar of the Holy Cross.”

Thus, on the one hand, she does not force anyone to follow her ways, and on the other hand, she does not flaunt her habits; she simply enters a state of rapture, thus setting an example for others that is respectable, but not necessarily to be followed in every detail. Nothing could be further from her habit of helping others in all things with tender humility than pompous ostentation.

By royal descent, she is of the highest rank among the nuns, but this does not occur to her even when a spoiled fellow nun spills the dishwater on her in anger at being made to do such menial work. Rather, she gently appeases her abuser, and almost apologises for the other’s arrogance: “One day, when, as was her custom, Saint Margaret wanted to take the basin with the swill of the washing water out of the refectory, but could not because of the multitude of waters, she called a soror to help her, soror Csenge, the daughter of the county head of Bodold. So, this soror went, and when they carried the swill outside the refectory, this named soror began to splash Saint Margaret in the face with the swill. But this holy virgin endured it all in peace, and smiling, only said, ‘Beloved sister, what are you doing?’”

To be sure, while she could be so lenient with others, she was harsher with herself than with anyone else. Regarding the means of her asceticism, we read in her legend: “The treasures of this holy virgin in her chest were these: in it were two cilices. One of them was now broken from being worn so often, and the other cilice was new, and in the chest was a girdle made of iron, with which the cilice was girded underneath for great stiffness, and a rod, on which was tied the skin of a hedgehog with the bristles, with which the holy virgin whipped herself, and also in the chest were a pair of felt footcloths, studded on both sides with small pointed iron nails, which the holy virgin wore on her feet.”

Of these objects, the penitential belt of iron is preserved in the Christian Museum of Esztergom. It is easy to imagine that this way of life, which totally contrasted with Margaret’s royal descendancy, sometimes caused aversion even among her fellow nuns. But that is the way of holiness: to go beyond the boundaries, to do something extraordinary in the name of love, goodness, justice, and divine values. And why did she choose to do all this?

Margaret’s mission

Margaret had a mission: Her parents offered her to God for the salvation of Hungary even before she was born. She then, of her own free will, took on this sacrificial role when she grew up, vowing to be betrothed to Christ alone. Therefore, she always refused the offers of marriage that came to her, although in the case of King Ottokar of Bohemia in particular, her parents and her entire environment exerted great pressure on her to accept the offer. But she, in the spirit of the third path proposed by Thomas Aquinas, submitting her own will to the will of God, strictly adhered to her vows.

The last lines of a contemporary sermon, erroneously attributed to Thomas, which, or a sermon like it, Margaret herself might have heard, given that the text is preserved in the *Leuven Codex*²⁷, could have been written about Margaret.²⁸

<p>“Inventa una pretiosa margarita, abiit, et vendidit omnia quae habuit, et emit eam, Matth. 13.</p>	<p>“Having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. Matthew 13:46.</p>
<p>In his verbis tria dicuntur. Primum margaritae inventio; secundum margaritae commendatio; tertium ejusdem margaritae emptio.</p>	<p>These words refer to three things: 1) finding the pearl, 2) praising the pearl, 3) buying the pearl</p>

27 On the origins of the Leuven Code, see Keréjkártó 2020.
<https://mki.gov.hu/hu/hirek-hu/evfortulok-hu/leuveni-kodex-titokzatos-tortenete-es-hazakerulese>

28 Although it is more probable that the sermon is about Saint Margaret of Antioch. But interestingly enough, historically it is also not clearly excluded that it is about Saint Margaret of the Árpád dynasty, considering her rapidly spreading cult in Italy at that time. Regardless of the historical facts, however, the description fits Saint Margaret of the Árpád dynasty as well.

<p>Per margaritam istam intelligitur Dei filius [...] Talis margarita est lapis parvus, invenitur in profundo maris, in ventre piscis, et in mensa campsis. In his tribus locis consuevit inveniri margarita: sic Christus invenitur in mari, idest Maria, per incarnationem. [...] In pisce, idest in Christo homine per unionem. [...] In altari, per sacramenti transubstantiationem.</p>	<p>[...] By this pearl we mean the Son of God. [...] Such a pearl is a tiny stone found at the bottom of the sea, or in the belly of a fish, or on a banker's table. The pearl is usually found in these three places, just as Christ is found in the sea [<i>in mari</i>], that is, in Mary, by the incarnation. [...] In the fish, that is, in Christ who became man, by the union [...] And on the altar, by the transubstantiation of the sacrament. [...]</p>
<p>Circa tertium sciendum, quod margarita emitur triplici denario: scilicet aeneo, argenteo et aureo. Aeneus est substantia mundi, argenteus corpus, aureus anima. Aeneo emit qui dat divitias pro ista margarita; argenteo, qui dat corpus; aureo, qui dat animam. Primum fit per renuntiationem divitiarum; secundum per corporis mortificationem; tertium per propriae voluntatis abnegationem[...] Possunt autem exponi de ista beata, quae fuit pretiosa margarita propter speciositatem virginitatis, propter praedicationis utilitatem, et propter insuperabilem soliditatem: quam invenit mercator caelestis et emit sanguine suo Christus Deus noster, qui est benedictus in saecula. Amen.”²⁹</p>	<p>We should know that pearls can be bought with three types of coin: ore, silver and gold. Ore is the substance of the world, silver is the body and gold is the soul. Whoever buys it with ore gives his wealth for this pearl, with silver if he gives his body, and with gold if he gives his soul. The first is done by giving up earthly goods, the second by mortification of the body, and the third by denying one's own will. [...] But all this may be understood as referring to this blessed woman, who was a pearl of great price (pretiosa <i>Margarita</i>), by the beauty of her virginity, the usefulness of her words, and her unsurpassed firmness, who was found and purchased by the blood of the heavenly merchant, our Christ the Lord, who is blessed for ever. Amen.”</p>

The example of Margaret's holiness of life already inspired great respect and admiration during her life, but even more so immediately after her death. Her patronal role in her chant has been preserved in collective memory since the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries (and perhaps more famously in the *Hymn of the Hungarian Saints* dating from the 17th century):³⁰

29 Aldobrandinus de Cavalcantibus, Sermones, pars 2 n. 52

30 Translation into Hungarian: Vigilia, 1971, pp. 297–299

“Gratuletur Hungaria
de Christi beneficio,
cuius extat vicaria
salutari suffragio.”

“Rejoice and celebrate, Hungarian
homeland,
for Christ is so gracious to you,
there is now one who would speak for
you,
and grants you salutary intercession.”

(*Chant in verse by Saint Margaret of Hungary, 1276-1320*)³¹

In our secularised, individualistic, hedonistic age, it may seem that the Thomistic “balance” between corporeity and spirituality found by Margaret is perhaps tilted too much towards the latter. However, as we have said, Margaret herself would never have imposed her own path to spiritual perfection on others. Perhaps she would rather have said that this was her path, this was her mission, this was her example, but everyone should find his or her own path and mission learning from her example.



Codex containing the legend of St Margit of Lea Ráskai in Hungarian, 1510,
National Széchényi Library, Budapest

31 Collection of texts on the history of Old Hungarian literature – Middle Ages (1000-1530)
Sermones Compilati – Eötvös Loránd University, Institute of Old Hungarian Literature, 1991.

REFERENCES

- Csepregi et. al. 2018.** Csepregi Ildikó – Klaniczay Gábor – Péterfi Bence (szerk.): *Legenda Vetus. Acta Processus Canonizationis et Miracula Sanctae Margaritae de Hungaria. The Oldest Legend, Acts of the Canonization Process, and Miracles of Saint Margaret of Hungary.* Ford.: Csepregi Ildikó, Clifford Flanigan és Louis Perraud. Central European University Press, Budapest–New York, 2018.
- Csurgai 2017.** Csurgai Horváth József (szerk.): *Az első 300 év Magyarországon és Európában. A domonkos rend a középkorban.* Alba Civitas Történeti alapítvány, Székesfehérvár, 2017.
- De Jong 1996.** De Jong, Mayke: *In Samuel's Image. Childoblation in the early mediaval west.* E.J.Brill, Leiden–New York–Köln, 1996.
- Ilkó 2012.** Ilkó Krisztina: Az askézis gyakorlatának szélsőséges formái Szent Zoerard-András *vitájában.* In: Péteri Bence et al. (szerk.): *MICAE MEDIA-EVALES II., Fiatal történészek dolgozatai a középkori Magyarországról és Európáról.* Budapest 2012, 9–18.
- Kálny 2017.** Kálny Beatrix (szerk.): *Domonkos szentek és szent helyek.* Hereditas Graeco Latinitatis V. A Debreceni Egyetem Klasszika-Filológiai és Ókortörténeti Tanszékének kiadványa, Debrecen, 2017.
- Kerékjártó 2020.** Kerékjártó Ágnes: *A Leuveni Kódex titokzatos története és hazakerülése* <https://mki.gov.hu/hu/hirek-hu/evfortulok-hu/leuveni-kodex-titokzatos-tortenete-es-hazakerulese>. Letöltés dátuma:2022. 06. 30.
- Klaniczay 1981.** Klaniczay Gábor: A középkori magyarországi szentkultusz kutatás problémái. *Történelmi Szemle*, 24. (1981) 273–286.
- Klaniczay 2019.** Klaniczay Gábor: *Marcellustól Ráskai Leáig. Compilatio, egyeszerkesztés, újraírás a Margit-legendákban.* In: Bartók István – Jankovits László – Pap Balázs (szerk.): *Imitáció és parafrázis. Szövegváltozatok a magyar régiségben.* VersoKönyv, Pécs 2019, 11–18.
- Klima 2016.** Klima Gyula: A lélek a középkor filozófiájában. In: Székely Attila (szerk.): *Lélek enciklopédia.* Gondolat Kiadó, Budapest 2016, 49–75.
- Madas 1991.** Madas Edit (szerk.): *Szöveggyűjtemény a régi magyar irodalom történetéhez – Középkor (1000–1530).* Sermones Compilati. Eötvös Loránd

Tudományegyetem Régi Magyar Irodalomtudományi Intézet, Budapest, 1991.

Mályusz 1933. Mályusz Elemér: Árpád-házi Boldog Margit. (A magyar egyházi műveltség problémája). In: Alföldi András – Szekfü Gyula (szerk.): *Emlékkönyv Károlyi Árpád születésének nyolcvanadik fordulójának ünnepére*. Sárkány, Budapest 1933, 341–384.

Mezey 1955. Mezei László: *Irodalmi anyanyelvűségünk kezdetei az Árpád-kor végén*. Budapest, 1955.

Orbán 2001. Orbán Imre: „*Ecce, iam vici mundum!*” *Antiochiai Szent Margit tisztelete Magyarországon*. Budapest, 2001.

P. Böle 1944. P. Böle Kornél: *Gyöngyvirágok és margaréták Árpádházi Szent Margit oltárán. Születése 700 éves jubileumának és szentté avatásának ünneplése*. Credo!, Budapest, 1944.

Pongrácz 1943. Pongrácz Alajos: Az első nyomtatásban megjelent olasz nyelvű Árpádházi Boldog Margit legenda. *Olasz szemle: studiitaliani in Ungheria*, 2. (1943) 1. sz. 1037–1043.

Pusztai 2004. Pusztai Gabriella: Aszkézis és testi fenyítés a 13. századi női szenteknél. Árpád-házi Szent Erzsébet és Konrád viszonya a korabel latin és francia írásokban. *Kalligram*, XII. (2004) 2. sz.

Soós–Soósné 2019. Soós Sándor – Soósné Veres Rózsa: Asszonyunk, Mária megkoronázza Szent Margit asszonyt. *Acta Pintériana*, 5. (2019) 5–20.

SOURCES OF TEXTS

M. Nagy Ilona (szerk.): *Margit-legenda, Szent Margit élete 1510 digitális kiadása.*, Debrecen, Debreceni Egyetem 2011–2014.

https://deba.unideb.hu/deba/Margit-legenda_Szent_Margit_elete_1510/index.html

Madas Edit (szerk.): *Szöveggyűjtemény a régi magyar irodalom történetéhez – Középkor (1000–1530).* Sermones Compilati. EötvösLoránd Tudományegyetem Régi Magyar Irodalomtudományi Intézet, Budapest, 1991.

Sancti Thomae de Aquino *Liber de perfectione spiritualis vitae* (De perf.) Textum Leonino 1970 edito adaequatum ac translatum a Roberto Busa SJ in taenias magneticas denuo recognovit Enrique Alarcón atque instruxit.

Sancti Thomae de Aquino *Contra doctrinam retrahentium a religione* (Contra retr.) Textum Leonino 1970 edito adaequatum ac translatum a Roberto Busa SJ in taenias magneticas denuo recognovit Enrique Alarcón atque instruxit.

Wenzel Gusztáv: *Árpádkori Új Okmánytár,* Athenaeum. Budapest, 1873.





Hungarian Coronation insignia displayed as an interior.
“Kings and Saints – The Age of Árpáds”