

# Margrete of Nordnes in Cult, Chronicle, and Ballad

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**ABSTRACT:** *In 1290, Margrete, the 7-year-old daughter of King Eiríkr II Magnússon of Norway and Margaret, the daughter of King Alexander III of Scotland, begins a journey from Norway to Scotland. Unfortunately, Margrete, the heir presumptive to the throne of Scotland, dies en route, sparking a series of international and dynastic calamities. When, a decade later, a woman arrives in Bergen claiming to be the deceased princess, she is condemned to judicial immolation and burned at Nordnes. Surviving evidence strongly suggests that a popular cult developed around this Margrete of Nordnes (also called the 'False Margrete'). This essay explores the extent to which the West Norse legacy of this so-called "folk saint" can be identified from what Jens Peter Schjødt calls the "jigsaw pieces" that history has bequeathed to us in a variety of narratives and historical documents.*

**RESUME:** *I 1290 sætter Margrete, den 7-årige datter af kong Eiríkr II Magnússon af Norge og Margarete, datter af kong Alexander III af Skotland, ud på en rejse fra Norge til Skotland. Desværre dør Margrete, den forventede arving til Skotlands trone, undervejs, hvilket udløser en række internationale og dynastiske katastrofer. Ti år senere ankommer en kvinde til Bergen og hævder at være den afdøde prinsesse. Hun bliver dømt til brænding på bål og brændt på Nordnes. Overleverede vidnesbyrd tyder på, at der udviklede sig en populær kult omkring denne Margrete af Nordnes (også kaldet 'den falske Margrete'). Dette essay undersøger, i hvilket omfang de vestnordiske traditioner angående denne såkaldte "folkehelgen" kan identificeres ud fra det, Jens Peter Schjødt kalder de "puslespilsbrikker", som historien har overleveret til os i en række forskellige fortællinger og historiske dokumenter.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Auðfinnr Sigurðsson; Einarr Hafliðason; "folk saint"; Frúgvín Margreta; Hafliði Steinsson; heterodoxy; Margrete of Nordnes; pilgrimage; Sancte Maritte kirke*

## Introduction

In discussing the methodological challenges of working on pre-Christian religions in northern Europe, Jens Peter Schjødt makes the all-too-apt comparison to “coming across some of the pieces of an old jigsaw puzzle in a bag”– worse yet, a few of the pieces in the bag belong to a different puzzle, a few are missing, and so on (2012, 9). A compounding difficulty, he notes elsewhere, is the informant’s degree of familiarity with the topic, that is, are the observations made through the eyes of a native observer (i.e., an active tradition bearer) or those of a non-native, whether foreign by reason of geography or time, observations which in either case, as Schjødt writes, “are written by people who belong to another culture” (2017, 6). The present essay extends Schjødt’s observations to a very different sort of case, one of medieval “folk Catholicism”,<sup>1</sup> sifting through the discursive “jigsaw pieces” bequeathed to us by an uneven posterity to see if, our modern perch notwithstanding, we cannot form a clearer picture of “Margrete of Nordnes” in particular and of popular religion in late medieval Scandinavia more generally.<sup>2</sup>

### The Events and the Beginnings of a Cult

In 1290 a great tragedy simultaneously befell Norway and Scotland, when, en route from Bergen to Scotland, the 7-year-old Margrete,<sup>3</sup> the heir presumptive to the throne

<sup>1</sup> On this concept, see below. I take this opportunity to thank the editors of these volumes, as well as the anonymous reviewer, for their many thoughtful suggestions about the essay. My greatest debt of gratitude, of course, is to Jens Peter Schjødt for many years of good fellowship, joyful collegiality, and inspiring scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> In general, I have used standard Old Norse/Icelandic name forms; however, English Margaret, typically normalized to Margrét in Old Norse/Icelandic, was often Margrete (with spelling variations) in medieval and early modern Norwegian and Danish. Here I default to Margrete where not quoting texts.

<sup>3</sup> The complicated situation of the young Margrete (1283-1290) has been the topic of considerable debate over the years. Her mother, also Margaret (1261-1283) – daughter of King Alexander III (1249-86) and his wife, yet another Margaret (d. 1275), the daughter of the English king Henry III – had been married to the young Norwegian king, Eiríkr II (d. 1299), the grandson of King Hákon Hákonarson in 1281. The Scottish text of the marriage arrangements between Scotland and Norway, dated at Roxburgh, 25 July 1281 (“APUD ROKESBURG, XXV DIE JULII, A.D. M,CC,LXXXI”, *Acts*, pp. 79-82), calls for the female offspring of the couple to inherit the Norwegian throne to the extent such a practice would be in line with tradition. Norwegian law had, however, previously codified the principle that the heir was to be the eldest legitimate *son* of the king (e.g., “Sa skal konongr vera i noreg er skilgetinn er noregs konongs sun hinn ellzte oðalborenn...” *NGL* 1: 263), on which see Jochens 1987. The couple’s only child, Margrete, was born in early 1283; her mother died at about the same time, presumably from complications arising from the birth. As it happened, all of the Scottish king’s other heirs pre-deceased him, and the Scottish nobles at the parliament of Scone, 5 February 1283, swore to acknowledge Alexander’s granddaughter, Margrete of Norway, as their sovereign in the event of the death of Alexander (“APUD SCONAM, V DIE FEBRUARII, A.D. M,CC,LXXXIII”, *Acts*, p. 82). When the Scottish king died in 1286 and his pregnant second wife, Yolande de Dreux, failed to produce an heir, his then three-year-old granddaughter,

of Scotland, the daughter of Eiríkr II Magnússon, king of Norway, and Margaret, the daughter of King Alexander III of Scotland, died near South Ronaldsay in the Orkneys. Her death would lead to a long series of international and dynastic troubles, not least for Scotland.<sup>4</sup> For Norway, it meant that when King Eiríkr died in 1299, his brother ascended the throne as King Hákon V. The following year (1300), ten years after the death of Margrete, in later years known as the “maid of Norway” (correspondingly, her mother came to be called the “maid of Scotland”),<sup>5</sup> a woman and her husband arrive in Bergen from Lübeck. This woman claims that she is, in fact, the deceased Margrete. In 1301, the pair are executed: the husband is beheaded and the woman is subjected to judicial immolation and burned on a pyre on Nordnes, across Vågen from “Tyske Bryggen.” The next year, 1302, one of those who is said to have accompanied the young Margrete on her trip to Scotland, Auðunn Hugleiksson, called *hestakorn*, is executed at Nordnes, having been imprisoned in 1299, events that also play into the later narrative traditions.

These are the very barest facts as we (re-)construct them today, although it must be said that the evidence surrounding the story of the False Margrete, as the woman came to be known, are in exceedingly short supply, *especially* as regards information contemporary with the events of 1300-1301.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, although many medieval sources, such as the Icelandic annals, will in subsequent decades record (“backfill” might be a more accurate term) this information, it is first twenty years later, in 1320, that we have documentation about the False Margrete affair understood to be broadly contemporary with it. In a document from 1<sup>st</sup> of February 1320, the Bishop of Bergen, Auðfinnr Sigurðsson, forbids acts of veneration of “the woman who was burned at

Margrete, became the heir presumptive to the Scottish throne. Contemporary sources differ on whether the young Margrete was regarded as the Scottish queen, with some Norwegian (e.g., *DN* 19, nr 328) and English (e.g., *DN* 19, nr 335) sources using the term, but it is not a designation found in Scottish sources. On this issue, see Duncan 2002, 175-183, who concludes categorically, “Never inaugurated, she was never queen of Scots” (182).

<sup>4</sup> See the accounts in, e.g., Reid 1982; Barrow 1990; Duncan 2002, 175-183; Brown 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Employing the designations “maid(en) of Scotland” and “maid(en) of Norway”, although undoubtedly anachronistic, is a useful disambiguation, given the many women in these events named Margaret. The practice was apparently well-entrenched already by the eighteenth century, when David Dalrymple writes for 1283, “Margaret Queen of Norway died, leaving an only child, Margaret, called by our historians *the maiden of Norway*.” (1776, I: 182; emphasis in original). In fact, early signs of the tendency are already to be seen in the medieval sources themselves (cf. the early fifteenth-century *The Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland's* “The Kyng off Norwayis douchtyr fayre, / Off Scotland and Norway that tyme ayre, / Margret cald, that madyn yhyng, / The dowchtyr douchtyr off oure Kyng”, II:277 (The King of Norway’s daughter fair, / of Scotland and Norway at that time heir, / Margret called, that maiden young, / The daughter-daughter of our King)). Although I recognize the somewhat romanticizing implications of referring to the young princess in this way, the practical advantages of doing so strike me as sufficient to warrant maintaining the practice. The translations here and elsewhere, where not otherwise attributed, are my own.

<sup>6</sup> Several excellent studies on, for example, the foreign policy and administrative aspects of these incidents (e.g., Crawford 1990; Helle 1990) have added considerably to our understanding of the context of the events of 1300-1301.

Nordnes" (thenne kone som i Nordnesse wor brendt).<sup>7</sup> The bishop focuses on several key points: 1) the accusations against the woman and the process by which she was judged; 2) the death, identification, and burial of "the maid of Norway"; 3) why the woman could not be the offspring of King Eiríkr; and 4) the bishop's prohibitions against all forms of worship or adoration of the False Margrete.

Bishop Auðfinnr's proclamation, *Mod pillegirms reysse till Nordnesse till sancte Maritte* (Against pilgrimages to Nordnes to [the church of] Sancte Maritte) is known only from a later transcription, part of a manuscript is dated to the middle or second half of the 1500s.<sup>8</sup> Described as having "obviously" (*tydliggen*) been written in Bergen, it arrived in Sweden at some unknown time by unknown means.<sup>9</sup> The full manuscript consists of *Afskrift af Breve, i Afskrift eller halv Oversættelse (Blandingssprog)* (transcriptions of letters, in transcription or in half translation (mixed languages)), among which the bishop's letter is found, followed by selections from *Heimskringla*, *Gulathingslov*, copies of letters, and other materials.<sup>10</sup>

Following the formulaic opening to all those "som thette breff see eller hører" (who see or hear this letter), Bishop Auðfinnr notes that he has been informed of "mange wanuitige meniske" (many senseless people) who "kaller aa then konne med storum heitom och dyrka[n] som hun were gudtz pinslar [wotte]" (call on that woman with great vows and adoration as if she were a martyr of the Lord). "[N]u hun gripen wor och dømp't i landtzr[ode] sag,<sup>11</sup> effther thij att hun holtt sig att were vdspring och lofflige arffuingie werdelige herre Erickis Norigis konning" (now she was seized and sentenced by the council [?],<sup>11</sup> for having held herself to be the off-spring and lawful heir of [our] worthy lord, Eiríkr, Norway's king). Further, "effther thij thet wor kun obenbarlige falsk och suig hun for med, tog hun sin ende dom brendendis ij enn boll,

<sup>7</sup> DN 6, nr 100, to which all subsequent references refer.

<sup>8</sup> "Papir-haandskrift fra Midten eller 2den Halvdel af 16de Aarhundrede, skrevet i Bergen med én Haand (undt. Bl. 77– 80)" (Paper manuscript from the middle or second half of the sixteenth century, written in Bergen in a single hand (excepting lv. 77–80.)) (*NGL* 4, 693). The transcription is part of the Icelandic manuscript collection of Kungliga Biblioteket, Stockholm, with the signum Isl. papp. fol. nr 84 (NB: The entry is sometimes, as in *NGL* 4, referred to as Danica 43 fol.). Several transcriptions were made before the original copybook perished in the great Copenhagen fire of 1728, but of Bishop Auðfinnr's prohibitions regarding "the woman who was burned at Nordnes", there is only the copy in Holm. Isl. papp. fol. nr 84. On the manuscript's history, and those of the copies, see especially Seip 1933 and Berulfsen 1954-55. A digitized version of the manuscript is available through the Arnamagnæan Institute at: <http://digitalesamlinger.hum.ku.dk/Home/Details/595816>. I take this opportunity to express heartfelt thanks to Dr. Patrik Granholm of the Royal Library, Stockholm, for his generous assistance as I was preparing this essay.

<sup>9</sup> Gödel (1897, 217) notes that the manuscript bears the following in the hand of Johan Hadorph (1630-1693), Sweden's first *riksantikvarie*: *Norske Guletings Lagens fragm: Med annat för och effter åt* (Fragment of the Norwegian *Gulathingslov*, with other [matter] before and after).

<sup>10</sup> On the contents of the manuscript, see *NGL* 4, 693-694 and Gödel 1897, 216-217.

<sup>11</sup> Regarding the phrase *i landtzr[ode] sag*, see the comments in Berulfsen 1954-55, 165-166, who argues that, rather than a reference to a judgement by a specific sort of council (*landráð*, *landsræt*, etc.), the phrase may instead indicate more simply that the affair was tried as a secular case (*causa temporalis*), not a religious one (*causa spiritalis*).

effther landtzens log och beste mendz raadt som tha wore i Norige i then stad paa Nordnesse som slig misgiernings folck ere von med reffsinge sitt lifff att lade" (because she promoted obvious falsities and treason, she met her final judgement burning on a pyre, according to the law of the land and the counsel of the best men who then were in Norway in that place on Nordnes where such malefactors are accustomed as punishment to lose their lives).

The bishop then notes that the daughter of King Eiríkr and Margarete of Scotland had died in the Orkney Islands on her way to Scotland. Her body was returned to Bergen, where her father identified her, and had her interred next to her mother. Moreover, the woman who was executed could not have been the same individual as the king's daughter, "thij hun prouedest att werre xx wetre eldre konne, end thenn timen suarede, som Erick konning giorde brøllup sitt med Margarete dronning, wor tha hand icke eldre, end xiiij wettre gammildt och thij kunde hand icke werre fader aff saa gammild en quinde" (for she proved to be a woman 20 years older than corresponded to the time when King Eiríkr married Queen Margaret, when he was not more than 13 years of age and therefore could not be the father of so old a woman). The bishop continues by noting that the woman came to Bergen from Lübeck and was "graa herritt och huid i hoffuidit" (grey-haired and [lit.] 'white in the head'). The proclamation closes with the bishop forbidding under pain of exclusion from the holy church anyone "att dyrcke med offer och pile grims ferdt faste, eller almenninge bøne haldt" (to worship this woman with offerings and pilgrimages, fasting, or holding communal prayers), and concludes by expressing interest in learning "om hun kunde nogre obenbarlige jertegen giøre" (if she were to perform a manifest miracle).

A violent reaction to a public reading of this proclamation on 2 March 1320 leads to some nineteen witness statements, procedural documents, and episcopal exchanges dealing with the confrontation (*DN* 6, nr 100; *DN* 8, nrs 51-68) that bear witness to the substance of the sixteenth-century transcription. In his statement to Bishop Auðfinnr in early March, *síra* Árni complains to the bishop of the grave assaults and injuries done to him (*graves insultus et injurias mihi faciens*) by Bótólfr Hákonarson, *canonicum Nidrosiensem* (canon of Niðaróss) (*DN* 8, nr 51). In Auðfinnr's letter to Archbishop Eilífr of Niðaróss on 2 April 1320, with the heading *Margareta in Nordnæs*, the bishop explains, "...sendom ver sira Arna prest sem nu er skulamæistare .j. Berghwin at lesa þat sama bref j Postola kirkiu sem .j. allum adrum kirkiuum ok klaustrum .j. Berghwin" (we sent the priest Árni who is now the school master in Bergen to read [aloud] the same letter in the Church of the Apostles as in all other churches and cloisters in Bergen) (*DN* 8, nr 67).

It is in the process of carrying out this task that *síra* Árni is attacked in the Chapel of the Twelve Apostles in Bergen by *síra* Bótólfr:<sup>12</sup> "...þa gerdi sira Botolfr Hakonarson openbærlegha olyðni. ok motestaðu væitti. at fyrnæmfnd bref skilldu æighi lesazst. ok lagðe hæimftughar hendr .a. sira Arna fyrnæmdan. ok villde með valde .j. kirkiu ok

<sup>12</sup> The title *síra* (cognate with English *sir*, *sire*) has predominantly ecclesiastical associations in Icelandic usage. No truly suitable gloss being available, I leave the term in the original throughout.

almanna fære taka af sira Arna þau samu bref” (then *síra* Bótólfr Hákonarson committed manifest disobedience and resistance [in order] that the aforementioned letters should not be read, and laid violent hands on the aforementioned *síra* Árni and would with violence in the church and a public place take from *síra* Árni the same letters) (*DN* 8, nr 67). Supported by a number of witness statements, Auðfinnr puts the uncooperative Bótólfr under threat of excommunication (*DN* 8, nrs 65, 66), and relays the information to Archbishop Eilífr, who reacts with displeasure at the news (“Miok þikkir oss stygleght vera þau tíðendi...”) (*DN* 8, nr 68), suggesting leniency instead.

## Veneration, Commemoration, and Narrativization

In addition to these documents, later evidence about the False Margrete strongly suggests that the cult of a local saint was developing, as some people believed she was the real Margrete and innocent of the charges. Importantly, in the decades following the execution, a small church, “Sancte Maritte kirke”, was constructed on or near the location of the False Margrete’s burning on Nordnes, a building still in use in the early sixteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Donations mentioned in the wills of German merchants who had lived in Bergen suggest a connection between the church and the False Margrete,<sup>14</sup> and the church is also referred to confidently in connection with her in sixteenth-century historical narratives from Bergen. One of these states, “Og blev bygt trækapell henne til ære paa Nordnes, som de kallede sancte Maritte kirke” (And a wooden chapel was built in her honour on Nordnes, which they called Saint Maritte church) (*Bergens Fundats*, 528-529). Sixteenth-century lists of religious houses in Bergen consistently record a “Sti Margrethe Capell paa Nordnes” and “St Maritte paa Nordnes” (*Bergens rimkrønike*, 32; *Bergens Fundats*, 535). Similarly, another sixteenth-century text maintains, “Bygdes henne siden en kirke til ære, som var kallet efter hennes navn” (A church was later built in her honour, which was named after her) (*Norges Beskrivelse*, 134).

Against this impression of veneration, a somewhat more ambiguous picture emerges from many of the narrative sources, especially the annals.<sup>15</sup> Most Icelandic annals merely note the arrival in Bergen of the False Margrete, her claim to be the true heir, or her execution, some in more detail than others. For example:<sup>16</sup>

*Annales vetustissimi* (AM 415 4<sup>o</sup>, c. 1310)

brend kona or þyðerskv a Norðnesi. ok hals høgvinu boanndi hennar (*Annaler*, 52)

(the woman from Germany burned on Nordnes and her husband beheaded)

<sup>13</sup> Knut Helle (1982, 580) argues that the church was built by 1372 at the latest, perhaps before 1366.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., *Die Lübecker Bergenfahrer und ihre Chronistik*, nr. 50 (1394), nr. 122 (1447).

<sup>15</sup> On the need for caution in using these materials, see, e.g., Haug 1997; Rowe 2002; Sigurdson 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Manuscript dates follow *ONP* and *Annaler*, ii-xxxviii.

*Annales regii (Konungsannáll)* (GKS 2087 4<sup>o</sup>, c. 1300-1328)

Brend i Biørgyn kona sv' er sagðiz dottir Eiriks konungs (*Annaler*, 146)

(Burned in Bergen the woman who claimed to be the daughter of King Eiríkr)

*Skálholts-Annaler* (AM 764 4<sup>o</sup>, c. 1360-1380)

Pa var brend kona su er vera létz dottir Eiriks konungs Magnus sonar ok heita Margrét (*Annaler*, 199)

(Then was burned the woman who said that she was the daughter of King Eiríkr Magnússon and was named Margrét)

*Flato-annaler (Flateyjarbókarrannáll)* (GKS 1005 fol., c. 1387-1395)

þa kom or þyduersku kona su er vera kuez dottir Eireks kongs ok Margretar dottur Alexandri Skotakongs ok kuez selld hafa verit af Ingibiorgu Erlings dottur [...] þa var brend þessi sama kona er vera quaz dottir Eireks kongs ok halshogginn bondi hennar. (*Annaler*, 387)

(Then came from Germany the woman who claimed to be the daughter of King Eiríkr and Margaret, the daughter of Alexander, king of the Scots, and who said she had been sold by Ingibjörg Erlingsdóttir [...] Then was burned the same woman who claimed to be the daughter of King Eiríkr and her husband was beheaded)

*Oddveria Annall* (AM 417 4<sup>o</sup>, c. 1579-1580)

þa kom af þyduersku landi kona su er wera kuadz dottir Eireks kongz og Margrietar drottningar: sagdist selld hafa werid af Jngibiorgu Ellingz dottur (*Annaler*, 486)

(Then came from Germany the woman who claimed to be the daughter of King Eiríkr and Queen Margaret; said she had been sold by Ingibjörg Erlingsdóttir)

*Henrik Høyers Annaler* (AM 22 fol., c. 1600-1625)

Brend kona ur þyðversku a Norðnesi – su er sagðiz dottir Eiriks (konungs) oc hals haugvinn bondi hennar (*Annaler*, 72-73)

(a woman from Germany was burned on Nordnes – the one who claimed to be the daughter of King Eiríkr – and her husband beheaded)

It is, of course, important to bear in mind that the entries are generally recorded well after the events they memorialize, and, of course, the entries cannot be assumed to have independent source value.

*Lögmannsannáll* stands out among the annals, both for its contents and its relationship to the fourteenth-century *Lárentíus saga biskups*, as both texts are attributed to Einarr Hafliðason (1307-1393). It is with *Lögmannsannáll*, written by Einarr before 1361, that we have clear evidence of how these events are being memorialized and narrativized, a story that helps explain the veneration reported in 1320. Einarr Hafliðason, the writer of this section of *Lögmannsannáll*, was a renowned man of letters, a cleric connected to the Hólar diocese, the holder of the benefice of Breiðabólstaðr í Vesturhópi, and, very importantly, the son of síra Hafliði Steinsson (1253-1319). This Hafliði was in Bergen at the time Margrete, “the maid of Norway”, embarked on her fateful journey and had been the king’s *kapelluprestr* or *hirðprestr* (chaplain). According to *Lárentíus saga biskups*, “Hafði síra Hafliði áðr verit burt til Nóregis ok var

kapelluprestr Eiríks konungs ok dróttningarinnar um nokkor ár” (*Síra Hafliði* had previously been in Norway and was the chaplain to King Eiríkr and the queen for some years) (B7 [p. 232]). Both the A and B manuscript traditions of *Lárentíus saga* mention in nearly identical language the execution of the False Margrete: “Ári öðru eftirfarandi var hengdr Auðunn *hestakorn* ok brennd Margrét er kallaðiz vera dóttir Eiríks konungs” (The following year Auðunn *hestakorn* was hanged and Margrét, who claimed to be the daughter of King Eiríkr, was burned) (A17; B19 [257-258]). To this statement, B adds, “ok bóndi hennar” (and her husband).

The information in *Lárentíus saga* about Margrete is in style and content nearly indistinguishable from the entries in the Icelandic annals, basically, a bald statement of fact. By contrast, Einarr’s other reference to these events, in *Lögmannsannáll*, gives them a very different treatment, inverting the styles of the two narratives, with the saga containing the more laconic report of who, what, where, and when, while it is the annal that contains the fuller, livelier, and more interesting entry. Furthermore, in contrast to the other Icelandic annals and to *Lárentíus saga*, *Lögmannsannáll* does not refer at all to these events in the entries for 1300 and 1301, neither to the arrival of the False Margrete nor to her execution, but rather mentions her only in the entry for 1319, the year in which Einarr’s father, Hafliði, dies, where Hafliði’s career forms the basis for discussing Margrete of Nordnes:

*Lögmannsannáll* (AM 420b 4<sup>o</sup>, c. 1362-90)

Þ Sira Hafliða Steins sonar af Breiðabolstað [...] hann fór vtan ok var hirdprestr herra Eiríks kongs. bar þat þa till er Margrét dottir Eiríks kongs var buin j Biorgwin ok hana skillde flytia till till (!) Skotlands. sem hun vattade sialf sidan adr en hun var brend j Nordnese. at þa er ek var þetta sama port ofuan flutt. var þat þa hia postola kirkiu. var Jslenzskr prestr er Hafliða het medr fedr minum Eirike konge. ok þa er klerka þraut songinn. hof hann sira Hafliða vpp veni creator spiritus ok þann ymna songu þeir vt sua sem ek var a skip borin. Þetta ed sama sannade sira Hafliða. þa er honum var sagdt at su sama Margrét hafde brend verin (!) j Nordnese. (*Annaler*, 266-67)<sup>17</sup>

(The death of Hafliði Steinsson, priest of Breiðabólstað [...] he travelled abroad and was chaplain to King Eiríkr, and was in Bergen when Margrét, the daughter of King Eiríkr, was to be sent to Scotland. As she herself later testified before she was burned at Nordnes, “I was taken through this same gate on the way [to Scotland]; there was then at the Church of the Apostles an Icelandic priest named Hafliði who was with my father, King Eiríkr, and when the clergy ceased singing, *síra* Hafliði began the *Veni Creator*, and that hymn was sung to the end just as I was being taken on board the ship.” *Síra* Hafliði confirmed this same thing when it was told to him that this same Margrét was burned at Nordnes.)

This entry clearly represents a multi-layered set of memories, insofar as *Lögmannsannáll* was recorded by an adult Einarr Hafliðason (by 1361) about a memory his father, Hafliði Steinsson, would have described decades earlier (by 1319, when Hafliði dies), recalling an event that would in turn have occurred in 1290, and which

<sup>17</sup> On this entry and *Flateyjarbókannáll*, see Rowe 2002, 233-35.



was later “remembered” by the False Margrete at the time of her execution in 1301, a set of events Hafliði himself confirms when he is told about her death.<sup>18</sup>

Several texts from the immediate post-Reformation era testify to the degree to which this story continued to play a role in local history. The account in *Bergens Fundats*, likely to be the earliest of these works (from the mid-1500s; manuscript c. 1559-1560), tallies well with the evidence as presented above. Indeed, although there are important differences, *Bergens Fundats* mirrors several of the key points in Auðfinnr’s proclamation from 1320 and, toward the end, uses language such that one easily imagines that its author was familiar with the bishop’s text:<sup>19</sup>

Nogen aar efter kong Erik var frafallen, haver de Lybske hid ført til Bergen en kvinde, hed Margreta, med hennes egtemand. Den samme kvinde holdt sig at skulle være koning Eriks dotter, og vilde det saa bevise, at efter hennes moders død vilde koning Erik sende henne hjem til Skotland, og da haver hun været tagen i sjöen af sjörovere og ført til Tydskland, og sagde, at kongens mænd, som henne haver ført, siden dulde for kongen og sagde, at hun var död. Af saadan hennes sagn haver hun faaet stor anhang af bönder og borgere, som henne troede. Men kong Haakon, samme kong Eriks broder, han lod forfare hennes sag, og fants det saa i sanhed, at hun var xx aar [gammel den tid kong Erik döde, da skulde hun være [ældre kvinde, end hun skulde, om hun havde været] hans dotter. Dertil kom de frem med sanne vidnesbyrd, som hos vare og saa, at samme kongens mænd, som samme kongens dotter skulde have udfört, visseligen hjemførte liget til Bergen til kong Erik og provede, at kong Erik lod selv opslaa kisten og forsöge, om det var hans barn, og lod siden samme hans barn begrave hos sin moder Margreta i Kristkirke i Bergen. Der man nu forstod hennes sag var lögn [!], lode de henne brenne paa Nordnes og hennes mand halshugge anno domini 1301. Siden derefter haver nogen vanvittige folk formedelst djevelens indskydelse, endog at klerkeriet det nok forbod, holdet henne for en martir og haver sögt stor helligdom hos henne, dog ingen fundet. Og blev bygt trækapell henne til ære paa Nordnes, som de kallede sancte Maritte kirke. (Bergens Fundats, 528-529)

(Some years after King Eiríkr passed away, the Lübeckers brought here to Bergen a woman by the name of Margrete with her husband. The same woman claimed that she was King Eiríkr’s daughter and wanted to show that after her mother’s death King Eiríkr wanted to send her home to Scotland, and then she had been captured at sea by pirates and taken to Germany, and said that the king’s men who had accompanied her hid this from the king and said that she was dead. Due to this story of hers, she had acquired a great following among the peasants and townsfolk, who believed her. But King Hákon, the brother of the same King Eiríkr, he had her case investigated, and it was found that in truth she was 20 years old at the time King Eiríkr’s death, thus she was [an older woman than she should be if she had been] his daughter. To that they who were there came forth with testimony that the king’s men who were to transport the king’s daughter truly brought the corpse home to Bergen to King Eiríkr and testified that King Eiríkr

<sup>18</sup> This is naturally a somewhat simplified version of the possibilities. Perhaps the twelve-year-old Einarr heard the story directly from his father before the latter’s death in 1319; then again, perhaps it was a story later told to Einarr by others who had their own designs on the reputation of Margrete of Nordnes.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Auðfinnr’s *mange wanuitige meniske* (many senseless people) – *nogen vanvittige folk* (some senseless people) of *Bergens Fundats*. On the text, see *Bergen byleksikon* (<https://www.bergenbyarkiv.no/bergenbyleksikon/arkiv/1420315>).

himself had the coffin opened and investigated to see if it was his child, and subsequently had this his child buried with her mother, Margrete, in Kristkirke (Christ church) in Bergen. From that it was understood that her case was a lie, [and] they had her burned on Nordnes and her husband beheaded anno domini 1301. Since then some senseless people, inspired by the devil, even though the clergy forbade it, have considered her a martyr and have sought great holiness in her, without finding any. And a wooden chapel was built in her honour on Nordnes, which they call Saint Maritte church.)

*Bergens Rimkrønike* tells a similar tale,<sup>20</sup> although here too there are some important differences in tone and mood. So, for example, in this text the claim made by the False Margrete is presented in a much more personal style – “Kvinden sagde: dog hun var vel usel og arm, / alligevel var koning Eriks egte barn,/ og var kommen hennes faderarv at hente” (The woman said, though she was wretched and poor, / she was nevertheless King Eiríkr’s true child, / and had come to claim her patrimony) (*Bergens Rimkrønike*, 28). Yet, as in the other reports, the claim results in her death, as well as that of her husband, “daa blev hun brent paa en fyr / paa Nordnes strax udenfor Bergen, / og hennes mand ret med det hvasse jern” (then she was burned on a pyre / on Nordnes just outside of Bergen, / and her husband was executed with sharp iron).

The third of these texts, *Norges Beskrivelse* (also *Om Norgis Rige*) by Abasalon Pederssøn Beyer (c. 1567-1570), again differs in details and emphasis, but largely relays similar information. Having just mentioned events in 1303, he writes:

Samme tid noget tilforn blev Margrethe brent paa Nordnes, som var kallet hellig. Hun kom af Skotland med sin mand og sagde sig at være kong Eriks dotter, og efterdi det befantes at være løgn, blev hun brent her paa Nordnes, og hennes mand blev først halshuggen, og siden brent. Bygdes henne siden en kirke til ære, som var kallet efter hennes navn, men [der blev en dom afsagt, baade af de geistlige og verdslige, at ingen skulde dyrke henne; om henne er og en vise gjort. (*Norges Beskrivelse*, 134-35)

(Somewhat earlier Margrete was burned on Nordnes, [she] who was called holy. She came from Scotland with her husband and claimed to be the daughter of King Eiríkr, and after that was found to be a lie, she was burned here on Nordnes, and her husband was first beheaded, and then burned. A church was later built in her honour, which was named after her, but a judgement was made, both by religious and secular [authorities] that no one should worship her; about her a ballad was made.)

This comment from the later 1500s in Bergen about a ballad dealing with the False Margrete is tantalizing, as no complete Norwegian ballad about these events has ever been recorded, but in fact, three fragmentary texts, in two cases no more than a single stanza, were recorded in the late nineteenth century. These fragments contain sufficient allusions to suggest that the observation about the existence of a Norwegian ballad (*NMB* 64) about her is likely to have been accurate.<sup>21</sup> Even with as little as we

<sup>20</sup> Characterized in *Bergen byleksikon* (<https://www.bergenbyarkiv.no/bergenbyleksikon/arkiv/1420357>) as a versified form of *Bergens Fundats* known in two versions, one c. 1560, the other c. 1570-1580.

<sup>21</sup> Hammershaimb collected one of the CCF texts in 1847, and laments just a few years before the Norwegian ballad fragments were collected that this ballad had disappeared there without a trace (“er der sporløst forsvunden”) (1991 [1891], 119).

have, these three fragments contain details that relate to our materials, i.a., the names of those who accompanied “the maid of Norway” on her fatal voyage, the supposed treachery of these escorts, and an elaborate reference to a coffin (presumably tied to her father’s identification of the corpse). And it is notable that the broken 4-stanza multiform collected by Johannes Skar from an unidentified singer in Setesdal (“etter ukjent sanger, Austad, Setesdal, Aust-Agder”) bears a note above the title that it is “Ei lang’e Vise” (a long ballad).

Although we have only a modest echo of what once was the Norwegian ballad tradition about these events, by contrast, we possess a very significant amount of material from the Faroese ballad tradition, songs collected in the nineteenth century – the three multiforms consist of 4-line stanzas and vary slightly in length, from 166 to 172 stanzas.<sup>22</sup> *TSB* categorizes these, like the Norwegian fragments, as C 22 *Frúgvín Margreta* – *The Norwegian princess Margreta burnt at the stake in 1301* (CCF 77 A:I, B:II, C:II), and summarizes them thus:

King Eirik Magnusson’s daughter Margrete is sent across the sea accompanied by Audun Hestakorn and Ingibjörg. These two sell her to a foreign count who marries her when he learns who she is. Audun and Ingibjörg kill Margrete’s maidservant, take her body home to king Eirik and tell him that it is his daughter. She is buried as the king’s daughter, but that night she talks to the king in a dream, tells him who she is and where Margrete is. When later the king is dying he calls for his brother and says that if Margrete comes back she is to have half of his country. Margrete returns and goes to king Håkon Magnusson, and tells him who she is. He wants proof, but Margrete’s foster-mother falsely says she does not know her. Margrete is burnt at the stake. She has a son abroad who gathers a fleet and sets out to revenge his mother. *cf.*: Margrete, now in heaven, prays to God to stop all revenge. The fleet disappears in a storm.

These three fascinating texts are supplemented by a separate but related ballad, *TSB* C 23 *Eyðuns ríma* – *Audun Hestakorn accused and executed in 1302* (CCF 77 A:II; B:III; C:III; D), often described as a *táttur* of the *Frúgvín Margreta* texts and summarized in *TSB* as:

King Håkon Magnusson of Norway sends for Audun Hestakorn and accuses him of having embezzled the king’s estate, betrayed the king’s niece, Margrete, and having raped the king’s bride. Audun is hanged at Nordnes.

Whatever else we take away from these ballad texts, and there is much to say about them,<sup>23</sup> it is clear that they, like the Bergen humanist materials, provide reasons to

<sup>22</sup> On the Nordic historical ballads, see, e.g., Solheim 1973; Layher 2000. Taking an ethnohistorical perspective, David Buchan writes, “The historical ballads, we would all agree, are no ‘documents,’ but [...] they can be much nearer to the truth than is normally realized. They can contain factual truths that are not found in the often scanty records, and they can contain emotional truths, the attitudes and reactions of the ballad-singing folk to the world around them.” (1968, 66-67). On *Frúgvín Margreta* and related texts, cf. Hansen 2005, 94, who adopts a similar view in treating the *TSB* C22 and C23 materials, e.g., “Hinvegin kunnu søgukvæðini nýtast til at lýsa fólksligu fatanina av tí søguliga evni” (On the other hand, the historical ballads can be used to shed light on popular perceptions about the historical material).

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the comments on the relationship between the Faroese *Frúgvín Margreta*, *Eyðuns ríma*, and *Drotningin av Rúnsborg* (*TSB* D6) – and history – in popular tradition in Hammershaimb (1991 [1891], 120), and Hansen 2005.

believe in the strength of the image of the folklore motif, “innocent queen burned at stake” (Thompson Q414.0.7), as well as belief in the church on Nordnes having been dedicated to the innocent queen’s memory with the expectation that, as the site of a martyred innocent, benefits would accrue to those who venerated her there.

A striking point about the image that emerges is its geographical character: essentially all of the information about the history and aftermath of the False Margrete episode comes from Norway and the insular Norse world; there is no trace of it at all, it would seem, from medieval Sweden or Denmark. This information vacuum strikes me as surprising, given, for example, the potential gravity of the situation for her supposed uncle, the newly-crowned King Hákon; the negotiations that will soon begin with Eiríkr Magnússon of Sweden, who will subsequently marry King Hákon’s daughter and heir, Ingibjörg; the connections between St Birgitta and her family with Norway; and the arrival in the 1420s of the Birgittines at Munkeliv kloster, located near St Maritte on Nordnes.

Of course, the donations to St Maritte by former German residents of Bergen (above) provides important outside confirmation of the West Norse materials. And the events concerned with the death of the “maid of Norway” in 1290 are naturally widely attested in such historical British works as, for example, the fourteenth-century *Scalacronica* of Sir Thomas Gray, as well as in other English and Scottish historical sources (on which, see Anderson 1875). Moreover, the historical materials are partially incorporated into such traditions as the ballad “Sir Patrick Spens” (Child 58). None of these texts, however, comment directly on the False Margrete episode – so as far as direct sources of information about the events are concerned, they all come from the West Norse world.

### Contextualizing St Margrete of Nordnes

Layers of cultural, religious, and political concerns naturally undergird and frame everything we can know about these events.<sup>24</sup> On the surface level, of course, these would include the relevance of the woman’s claims for the international situation and the position of the recently crowned King Hákon. Strictly speaking, she would not have had as great a claim to the Norwegian throne as Hákon had, but any such assertion would have created ambiguity and might have provided a rallying point for those opposed to Hákon’s rule. And any legitimate claim by Margrete would presumably have had serious financial implications for the crown as well. Also important are the events that take place in the decades following the execution of the False Margrete, such as the tensions between the various interest groups in the town (e.g., the conflicts between Árni Sigurðsson, the bishop of Bergen (1305-1314), and the

<sup>24</sup> I focus here mainly on the religious dimensions of this case, but there are also important ethnopolitical considerations, which I hope to take up elsewhere. On these issues, I have benefitted enormously from discussions with Richard Cole (Aarhus University).

German residents, the so-called “winter-sitters”, of the city over tithing; the strife between the bishop and the *magister capellarum*).<sup>25</sup>

And modern analyses are certainly not made easier by the relative dearth of contemporary documents treating the False Margrete case – as we have seen, there are no documents relating directly to the trial and execution of Margrete. Thus, although scholarship has long assumed that a popular cult developed around Margrete (e.g., Daae 1879; Storm 1884), this aspect has tended to be overshadowed by the political and more conspiratorial aspects (and these on all sides of the North Sea). For example, P.A. Munch (1851-63, 4: 344-349) proposed a connection between the story of the False Margrete and the fate of Auðunn *hestakorn*: when the False Margrete arrives in Bergen in 1300, she claims that Ingibjörg Erlingsdóttir had sold her to “people who wanted her out of the way” (“Folk, der ønskede hende af Vejen”) and spread the story that she was dead, but she had in fact been taken to Germany. Improbable as it might have been that this woman, unlikely to be the real “maid of Norway”, would have been used by the nobles (*Stormandsparti*) against the king, Munch maintains that it would not have been impossible, given the provisions of the 1281 Treaty of Norburgh. Believing further that it would be inconceivable for the woman to have hit on this plan by herself, Munch argues that there must have been those who prepared her for the role by teaching her stories she could use to make her claim credible. Despite his being imprisoned, suspicion falls on Auðunn *hestakorn*, whose administrative work in Tønsberg had given him extensive contacts with German merchants, and some of them too, Munch reasons, were likely involved in the plan. Finally, Munch suggests that the *Veni Creator* story Margrete tells before her execution, subsequently confirmed on Iceland by the recollections of *síra* Hafliði, would have been of special importance to the spread among the populace of the sanctity of the martyred Margrete.

Naturally, the clouded circumstances under which the young princess died in 1290 and the consequences of her death for Scottish history quickly led to suspicions, “rumour panics” even, in the British Isles about what had taken place. Within weeks of the death of the princess, a letter from William Fraser (d. 1297), the bishop of St Andrews and a Guardian of the Kingdom of Scotland, to King Edward of England reports talk of political machinations behind her death (see Burton 1873, 116-17). Notably, the fourteenth-century *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland* is also understood to suggest obliquely that a conspiracy was involved in these critical events.<sup>26</sup> This early chronicle tells how, in Anderson’s paraphrase, the Princess was killed in 1290 because “the Norwegians would neither have a female nor one sprung from a foreign race to reign over them.” As Anderson cautiously concludes, “It is evident from this that in Wyntoun’s time the facts connected with the death of the Princess (if they had ever been fully known in Scotland) had already been obscured and mystified by rumours of

<sup>25</sup> On the relationship between the Bergen communities, see Helle 1994. On the issue of the royal *kapel*, see Bagge 1970 and Hamre 1982, and on the matter of tithing, see *DN* 1, nr 122; 2, nrs 95, 97, 101.

<sup>26</sup> *The Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland* by Andrew of Wyntoun (c. 1350 - c. 1423), Book 8, Chap. 1, ll. 99-120 [v. 2, p. 278] – see also below.

*the death of the False Margrete which must have reached this country*" (Anderson 1875, 405, emphasis added).

Among the many interpretations of the False Margrete case, an area which has perhaps not received sufficient attention is "folk Catholicism" and other aspects of popular religion in the growth of the fourteenth-century cult of Margrete of Nordnes, a period when veneration of the falsely accused appears to be of particular moment throughout Europe. In the late 1300s, for example, plays are produced for the Goldsmiths' Guild of Paris dealing with falsely accused women.<sup>27</sup> Even earlier, some fifty years before the arrival in Bergen of the False Margrete, in an area near Lyon, France, Étienne de Bourbon, a Dominican inquisitor and preacher, encountered a remarkable case of a martyred innocent being venerated locally as a saint. It is the well-known story of St Guinefort, the Holy Greyhound: having heroically saved a knight's child only to be mistaken for the perpetrator of the attack, the animal is rashly killed by the knight before the nature and outcome of his noble behaviour becomes evident. It is, of course, a localized multiform of a well-known folklore motif, one that formed part of the medieval preacher's "kit",<sup>28</sup> and a story which Étienne specifies in his *De Supersticione* (On superstition) as having had a cult centre at the dog's burial place, a site that plays a role in local healing traditions for infants:

Homines autem rusticani, audientes nobile factum canis, et quomodo innocenter mortuus est pro eo de quo debuit reportare bonum, locum visitaverunt, et canem tanquam martyrem honoraverunt et pro suis infirmitatibus et necessitatibus rogaverunt, seducti a diabolo et ludificati ibi pluries, ut per hoc homines in errorem adduceret.

(But the peasants, hearing of the dog's [noble] conduct and of how it had been killed, although innocent, and for a deed for which it might have expected praise, visited the place, honoured the dog as a martyr, prayed to it when they were sick or in need of something, and many there fell victim to the enticements and illusions of the devil, who in this way used to lead men into error.)<sup>29</sup>

The association of saints with particular groups or attributes was at this time still a matter of local preferences and traditions,<sup>30</sup> so the sorts of terms one frequently hears in modern parlance (i.e., the patron saint of lost causes, of universities, of shepherdesses, and so on), to the extent they existed,<sup>31</sup> would have generally acquired

<sup>27</sup> On these plays, and the *Miracles de Nostre Dame par Personnages* more generally, see, e.g., Harvey 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Thompson AT 178A "Llewellyn and His Dog", aka "The Brahman and the Mongoose", further identified by Tubach (1969) as sermon type #1695 "Dog and serpent", known from a variety of medieval northern European sources. On the case, see especially Schmitt 1983.

<sup>29</sup> Étienne de Bourbon, *Anecdotes historiques*, 326; the translation follows the text at <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/guinefort.asp> (accessed 6 March 2020). Notably, Bishop Auðfinnr, before being named to the episcopate, had studied in Orléans (Johansen 1952, 95-96), some 300 kilometres from Lyon.

<sup>30</sup> This custom continued until the seventeenth century, when Pope Urban VIII in 1638 established rules governing patron saints. See Parkinson 1911.

<sup>31</sup> Cormack, based on her extensive examination of the Icelandic situation, reports as regards prayers, "I have found no evidence for recourse to a saint because he specializes in a particular problem" (1994, 60).

their tutelary roles from biographical details, typically the details of how they had been martyred (e.g., Saint Margaret of Antioch).

Can we confidently say that there existed a cult of Saint Margrete of Nordnes? Auðfinnr paints a picture of this sort in 1320 when he describes people who “call on that woman with great vows and adoration as if she were a martyr of the Lord.” And centuries later the local Reformation-era writers believe that to have been the case, as, for example, in *Bergens Fundats*, which holds that people “have considered her a martyr and have sought great holiness in her.” Likewise, Absalon Pederssøn Beyer speaks of “Margrete [...] who was called holy”, suggesting there really once was a *hellige/heilage Margrete*.

An intriguing annotation in a medieval calendar, *Fragmentum Necrologicum Norvegiæ* (III), as it was called by its first editor, lists for 16 November, “Transitus Sancte Margarete Regine” (the passing of Saint Margrete the Queen).<sup>32</sup> In his survey of Norwegian saints, the historian Ludvig Daae suggests the possibility that, since no other Norwegian royal of that name had a reputation as a saint, this reference may indeed be to Margrete of Nordnes, an interpretation that, if correct, would certainly fit chronologically with the growing reputation of Saint Margrete of Nordnes.<sup>33</sup>

A more certain contemporary indication of a popular cult of Saint Margrete of Nordnes, however, is nestled away in an inventory of Icelandic churches: in a 1397 inventory of Mariúkkirkja at Skáney in Reykholtssdalr, “Margrietar lykneski af Nordnesi” (an image of Margrét of Nordnes) (*DI* 4: 121) is listed. Such a likeness, especially one labelled this way, suggests an acceptance of Margrete as a person worthy of veneration and that a “Saint Margrete of Nordnes” was indeed venerated at the church at Skáney (cf. Cormack 1994, 29, 122-123, 219).

Often cited in the Icelandic annals in immediate association with their notices about Margrete’s execution is the fact that a comet has been seen. In the medieval world, comets were understood to be something far more important than mere astronomical phenomena – they were taken to be direct signs from God with implications for future events (cf. Flint 1991, 136-138). Perhaps the most famous such

<sup>32</sup> The *calendarium* in which the so-called *Fragmentum Necrologicum Norvegiæ* appears is a separate section of Codex Tunsbergensis (NKS 1642, 4to). Consisting of the Borgarthing law code, the manuscript’s main section is dated to the first half of the fourteenth century. The *calendarium* precedes the law texts in the current manuscript and consists of leaves 7r to 10r (the notice about *Sancte Margarete Regine* appears on 9v). In his edition of the *Fragmentum*, Langebeck (1783, 385) dates the text to before 1400; *NGL* 4, 425-427 dates the section to c. 1330, but notes that various additions have been made in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries; Kålund (1900, 190) places this portion of the manuscript to the first half of the fourteenth century; see also *ONP* 1989, 481.

<sup>33</sup> “Da intet Spor kjendes til, at nogen anden norsk Fyrstinde af dette Navn har havt Hellighedsry, er det muligt, at herved sigtes til denne falske Kongedatter” (Given that there is no indication that any other Norwegian princess of that name has had a reputation for sanctity, it is possible that this refers to the False Margrete) (Daae 1879, 194). I note, however, that already the text’s eighteenth-century editor suggests that the reference might be to the wife of King Eiríkr, the “maid of Scotland”, who had died in 1283: “Forte *Margareta Scotica* uxor Eriki magni Regis, quæ obiit 1283”, *Fragmentum Necrologicum Norvegiæ*, 386.

case is the 1066 arrival of Halley's Comet, portrayed on the Bayeux Tapestry, where it portends the death of a king and a positive outcome for the Norman Conquest. Significantly, there was also an appearance of Halley's Comet in 1301, well-known for its influence on the presentation of the Star of Bethlehem in Giotto di Bondone's fresco in Padua (see Olson 1979) – was its appearance at the time of these events in Bergen perhaps understood to betoken important future events as well?

Almost all of the annals mention this phenomenon, some with the simple note of *Cometa* (comet), most with more expansive expressions like “Sén cométa vm allt Island ok i Noregi” (A comet was seen throughout all of Iceland and in Norway) (cf. *Annaler* 72-73, 146, 199, 387, 486). Once again, texts connected with Einarr Hafliðason are cut from different cloth:

*Lögmannsannáll*:

[1301] [...] Cometa var sen af kaupmonnum j hafue vm Michials messo skeid. syndizt þeim hun meire ok dockuare en adrar stiornur ok var kleppr nidr ok for hun huern aftan er þeir saa hana ofugt fra landnordre til nords. Jtem fyrir sunnan land var sen cometa halfuan maanud ner vetrnattum.

[1302] Cometa var sen j Birguin mote langafostu en j Roma fyrir paaska. Heingdr herra Audun hestakorn. (*Annaler* 263)

([1301] A comet was seen by merchants out at sea at about Michaelmas [29 September]. It seemed to them bigger and darker than other stars and was plumed, and each evening when they saw it, it moved with the plume in front northward from the northeast. Item, in the south a comet was also seen for half a month around “winter night” [c. 21 October].

[1302] A comet was seen in Bergen toward Lent and in Rome before Easter. Sir Auðunn *hestakorn* was hanged.)

And in nearly identical language, *Lárentíus saga biskups* reads (258, following A, with significant differences in B inserted parenthetically):

Ári öðru eftirfarandi var hengdr Auðun hestakorn ok brennd Margrét er kallaðiz vera dóttir Eiríks konungs (B: ok bóndi hennar). Kómata var sán af kaupmönnum í hafi um Mikjálsmessu [29 September] (B: Nicholasmessu [6 December]) skeið; sýndiz þeim hún vera dökkvari en aðrar stjörnur ok var á kleppr niðr, ok fór hún hvern aftan er þeir sáu hana öfugt frá landnorðri til norðrs. Var fyrir sunnan land ok sán kómata hálfum mánuði nær vetrnóttum [c. 21 October]. Kómata var ok sán í Björgvin móti langaföstu en í Róm fyrir páskir.

(The year after, Auðunn *hestakorn* was hanged and Margrete, who claimed that she was King Eiríkr's daughter was burned (B: and her husband). A comet was seen by merchants out at sea at about Michaelmas [29 September] (B: Nicholasmas [6 December]); it seemed to them to be darker than other stars and on it was a plume, and each evening when they saw it, it moved with the plume in front northward from the northeast. In the south a comet was also seen for half a month around “winter night” [c. 21 October]. A comet was also seen in Bergen toward Lent and in Rome before Easter.)

One cannot help but wonder if Einarr, in writing these narratives, wants to strengthen the case for the sanctity of Margrete of Nordnes and further her cult, as well as promote his father's important role in history?



Finally, we have the testimony of the Faroese ballads. We can be confident that a ballad about Margrete of Nordnes existed by at least the sixteenth century, but naturally we cannot be certain that the texts we have, collected in the nineteenth century, reflect what those earlier multiforms would have looked like. Storm (1884), however, believes that the sheer volume of correct details in the ballads means that these texts are apt to have been composed relatively close to the events, within what we might today call “communicative memory.” Luckily, our interest does not demand specific historical accuracy, an issue which has long dogged the study of such ballads, “only” (and it is a very significant “only”) whether or not the texts broadly indicate Margrete having been venerated or the object of a cult at some point.<sup>34</sup>

As it happens, all three of the Faroese multiforms do just that. Each includes a vision of the Virgin Mary before the execution, in A in a church (sts 115-116) and in a dream while in chains in B (sts 126-128) and C (sts 128-129). In all three cases, Mary admonishes Margrete to endure as best she can what she will experience on the pyre. And all three texts portray “Margreta Eiriksdóttir” (A st 137) asking that her uncle, King Hákon, have a church built on the site of her execution (“tú bið hann lata kirkju gera”, and so on (A sts 138-139; B sts 153-155; C sts 155-157)). And in A (sts 162-163), Margrete appears directly before God, where she falls on her knees and asks that there be no retribution for her death. This wish is granted in a miracle, when the avenging forces from the south, led by Margrete’s son, Magnus, sink and their souls are transported directly to heaven.

These elements in the ballads look to treat Margrete of Nordnes as an innocent martyr, just as one suspects the story of Hafliði confirming Margrete’s *Veni Creator* story is meant to do, and as the collocation of the Margrete narrative with the appearance of Halley’s comet is intended to emphasize. The idea that there had been a cult of St Margrete was generally assumed by early researchers: Gustav Storm maintained that the contemporary medieval interpretations of these events ran along class lines, with élites, especially the king and bishop (“Stormændene med Kongen og Biskop i Spidsen”), seeing Margrete as an imposter and non-élites (*Almuen*) seeing her as a saint (1884, 209). And it is through the perspective of anti- and pro-Margrete parties within the church that Bang understands the 1320 Árni-Bótólfr dispute (1887, 185-186), a view also reflected among the Bergen Humanists. On the other hand, modern treatments of the story tend to look askance at the religious component. Lars

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Solheim 1973 (1962); Hansen 2005. Concerning later traditions of the “Hanse brotherhood”, *Bergens Fundats* (542-43) reviews the customs (*skikk*) of the Hanseatic *kontor* including: “Skomager- eller Prædikespil, det er: paa en bestemt tid hver Paaskedag skulde de gange paa Nordnes ved ste. Maritte, og der skulde [en] opstige i et træ, som stod der, og fortælle hvis los snak der var overganget udi byen om piger eller kvinder, som er bleven lokket det aar, men det spil haver de aflagt strax guds ord var op kommet” (Shoemaker- or Sermon Game, that is: at a specific time every Easter, they should go to Nordnes by St Maritte [church], and there [one of them] should climb a tree standing there, and tell what loose talk there had been in the town about girls and women who had been seduced that year, but they immediately set that game aside as soon as the word of God began). Cf. Harttung 1877, 102-103, and Koppmann 1877.

Hamre, for example, sees the conflict between Árni and Bótólfr strictly in the context of a hierarchical dispute among church authorities (1970, 61-62).<sup>35</sup>

The support for the cult of Margrete of Nordnes in Iceland in particular is notable, and the suspicion mounts that Einarr Hafliðason had a special role in how the cult was being shaped and promoted. What might have motivated Einarr? His familiarity with the events through his father's, *síra* Hafliði's, experiences perhaps? The desire to show filial loyalty and acknowledge his father's role in the events? Some consideration having to do with church politics? His personal situation? On the other hand, the cult activities in Bergen noted in Bishop Auðfinnr's proclamation had a life of their own and were clearly notorious well before any contributions from Einarr.

And what perspective might a typical medieval Nordic Christian have brought to these events? For an individual who believed that Margrete of Nordnes was the real "maid of Norway", the circumstances of her death, especially as they are retold in the narratives (e.g., *Frúgvín Margreta*, and presumably in the corresponding lost Norwegian ballads), comport neatly with the traditions of martyred royals in northern Europe. As Margaret Cormack has pointed out, "the features in the stories of the murdered royal saints that clash so jarringly with the traditional model of Christian martyrdom resonate with the ideology of pre-Christian culture" (2002, 63). These properties include a death faced bravely, brought about through treachery, and instigated within the kindred by fellow claimants to the throne, all of which are present, even highlighted, in the ballad tradition that developed around Margrete of Nordnes.<sup>36</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

In reflecting on the nascent cult of Margrete of Nordnes, it is useful to recall that not all saints achieve the national or international status we see today in a St Olaf or St Birgitta. Among lesser-known medieval saints, some do achieve official recognition; some are venerated but never officially recognized as saints by Rome; and some so-called "folk saints" acquire strong, and often enduring, local cults but are never more widely venerated. To take an example of each type: Elin of Skövde, for example, was reportedly canonized already by the late twelfth century. A well-known saint from Swedish Västergötland, she became famous throughout Scandinavia (e.g., the

<sup>35</sup> "Kannikane der hadde truleg ikkje noko imot innhaldet i forbodsbrevet; men ut frå sitt syn på tilhøvet mellom seg og biskopen har dei sett på opplesinga i Apostelkyrkja som ein provokasjon" (The canons likely had nothing against the content of the prohibition announcement, but because of their perspective on the relationship between the bishop and themselves, they have seen the announcement in the Church of the Apostles as a provocation) (Hamre 1970, 61).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Cormack "They die at the instigation of claimants to the throne who are, as often as not, their relations. The martyr is *always* the victim of treachery, being slain either by a family member or by someone from whom he had a right to expect protection and support." (2002, 66). Cormack's essay also provides a very useful survey of the extensive body of relevant scholarship on this topic.

Helenekilde at Tisvilde, Sjælland) and over time was included among the patron saints of the falsely accused (see Schmid 1950; Pernler 2007). A devout Christian, she was falsely accused of having her pagan son-in-law murdered because of his brutal behaviour toward her daughter and was herself eventually, after a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, killed by the dead man's followers. At the end of the thirteenth century, Brynolf Algotsson, Bishop of Skara from 1278 to 1317, composes *Helenaofficiet*, and although there is no direct evidence of her being a patron saint of the falsely accused at that time, several references in this divine office suggest that the characteristic of having been falsely accused was closely associated with her cult.<sup>37</sup>

A different sort of example can be seen in another popular local saint in Sweden, Ingrid of Skänninge, whose saintly standing and popularity notwithstanding, never achieves official recognition (see Lundén 1951). And there are numerous minor local saints with strong traditions in specific regions, sometimes referred to as "peasant saints" (*bondehelgener*). A case from Numedal illustrates the type: little known outside the valley, Tollef Salemand, said to be the original settler, had several churches dedicated to him, as well as a cult whose observations were celebrated into the late seventeenth century, but he never appears to have become widely known outside the region (see Daae 1879, 198–199; Fett 1909, 140).

To varying degrees, each of these three cases contributes to understanding what R.N. Swanson, Jean Delumeau, and others refer to as a "folklorization" of Christianity.<sup>38</sup> A trait shared by élites and non-élites, this dynamic reticulation between the "great" and "little" traditions of the Middle Ages means that all levels of society participated in such "folklorizations" – or as one might reasonably prefer, "narrativizations." Considering these cases – St Elin of Skövde, St Ingrid of Skänninge, St Tollef – is instructive in envisioning what may have been happening with Margrete's cult. In the aftermath of the perceived martyr's death, a period of uncertainty and advocacy followed, as partisans campaigned in various ways for that individual to be venerated as a saint: the followers of the cult made their case with the church hierarchy (successfully or not),<sup>39</sup> and adherents attempted to establish observances, through saints' days (the notice in *Fragmentum Necrologicum Norvegiæ?*) and pilgrimage sites (St Maritte?), and in popular media and culture (*Frúgvín Margreta*). For Margrete of Nordnes, the case – however popular it may have been, to judge from the references to pilgrimages to the site of her martyrdom – seems ultimately not to have been accepted beyond a relatively small circle. On the other hand, the legacy of this Margrete – as presented in Icelandic letters, by the Bergen

<sup>37</sup> In, e.g., the *Leccio quarta* (201) and the *Communio* (218) in Brynolf Algotsson, *Helenaofficiet*.

<sup>38</sup> Swanson 1995, 186–87; Duffy 1992, 283. Although his is an extreme view, Jean Delumeau captures the essence of the idea when he argues in a somewhat different context that "la mentalité populaire folklorisait inconsciemment le Christianisme" (popular mentality unconsciously folklorized Christianity) (1971, 245).

<sup>39</sup> As has often been noted (e.g., Ditchfield 2009), the parallels between saint-making and heretic-making are strong.

Humanists, and by the ballads – was substantial and has outlasted the Reformation in oral tradition.

A convention within Western scholarship has been to place “universal” (global, *Welt*, and so on) religions in opposition to indigenous religious traditions, often referred to by such similarly amorphous phrases as tribal, folk, or local religions, the legacy, one suspects, of the colonial experience (cf. Bock 1966; Yoder 1974). “Folk Catholicism” is somewhat more specific, yet, in contemporary usage, it will most often be associated with “exotic” syncretic traditions within Catholicism, such as those famously forged in the Philippines and the Caribbean (e.g., Macdonald 2004; Stevens-Arroyo 2002). Increasingly, however, scholars recognize that this same sort of experience was also true in medieval and early modern Europe, an implicit component in Karen Jolly’s argument for what she usefully terms “middle practices” (1996). Although a very helpful discussion, “middle practices” too suggests a melding of two distinct religious traditions, which is not (or at least, not necessarily) what I have in mind by “folk Catholicism”, which I would characterize as localized developments within medieval Christianity, outside of, but not necessarily in opposition to, episcopal power or church doctrine, in short, heterodox rather than heretical.<sup>40</sup>

Of course, it remains to be seen whether further research will endorse, modify, or reject this assemblage of what Jens Peter Schjødt calls the “jigsaw pieces” that constitute the case of Margrete of Nordnes as an image of popular religion in late medieval Scandinavia. As a final reminder of the rumours of conspiracies and martyrdom that abounded with regard to almost all aspects of this many-sided story, I close with Wynthoun’s judgement about the death of the “maid of Norway”:

Dede than wes that Madyn fayre,  
That of lawch suld have bene ayre,  
And apperyd til have bene  
Be the lawch off Norway Quene.  
Bot that madyn swet for-thi  
Wes put to dede be martyry.  
(Andrew of Wynthoun, *The Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland*, II:278)

(Dead then was that maiden fair  
Who by law should have been heir,  
And appeared to have been  
By the law of Norway queen.  
But that maiden sweet for that  
Was put to death by martyrdom.)

<sup>40</sup> Thus, when some years ago I undertook a survey of heretical and heterodox views in medieval Scandinavia (2017), I looked to include precisely the unorthodox, often intense, outbreaks of “folk Catholicism” as examples of this perspective (i.e., the “heterodoxy” of the title).

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