The Life of St. Margaret of Antioch

Introduction

According to Christian hagiographic tradition, Margaret of Antioch was a young Christian woman living in late third- or early fourth-century Antioch (near modern-day Antakya in Turkey). In accounts of her martyrdom, Margaret is determined to protect her chastity from the pagan prefect who wishes to marry her and is therefore tortured, imprisoned, and eventually killed. While this is a common narrative structure for hagiography about virgin martyrs, Margaret’s legend is unusual in two ways. First, while imprisoned, Margaret defeats not just a devil but also a dragon; in many versions, including this one, she is swallowed by the dragon and bursts out of its belly when she makes the sign of the cross. Second, before ultimately being beheaded, Margaret prays to secure privileges and comforts for those who would venerate her, including that wherever there is kept a copy of her saint’s life, “Let there not be born a child that is blind, nor halt [with a mobility impairment], nor dumb, nor deaf, nor vexed by an unclean spirit.” Margaret’s prayer before her execution that invoking her name or the book of her martyrdom might prevent children from being born with various disabilities draws upon a moralization of disability that is evident throughout the narrative. Repeatedly, the idols said to be worshipped by pagans such as Margaret’s father Theodosius or the prefect Olibrius are described as “dumb and deaf.” The Old English uses medieval forebears of the modern words: dumbe and deafe. In religious terms, these labels frame the false gods of pagans as neither able to hear the prayers of their followers, nor able to make any reply. They are thus cast not just as blasphemous, but also as disabled.

The association between sin and disability, and conversely between salvation and health, is embedded in the vocabulary of Christian texts such as this. The trope of Christ the Physician (Christus medicus) highlights Christ’s biblical miracles of physical healing as parallels for his metaphorical healing of the soul through salvation. In Germanic languages, this evolved into epithets such as Hælend, which in Old English means “Healer,” but is typically translated in its metaphorical usage as “Savior.” In contrast to Latin medicus, OE Hælend contains within it the word for health or wholeness: hælu. Its opposite, unhælu or “unwholeness,” served as a widespread descriptor of a variety of impairments in early medieval England, including physical, sensory, and cognitive impairments, violent injuries, chronic illness, and bodily forms considered monstrous, such as that of Grendel in Beowulf. In order to emphasize the connection between Christ and
healing in this text, this translation retains the OE *Hælend*, encompassing both the physical implications of “Healer” and the spiritual implications of “Savior.”

The correlation between healing and salvation is crucial context for Margaret’s prayer that the veneration of her cult as a saint might prevent children from being born with impairments, as well as the divine response that those who already have impairments will be healed by touching her bodily remains. The text distinguishes between the forgiveness of sins and the healing of the body, but nonetheless parallels them as desirable outcomes in a Christian moral framework; as is often the case in medieval Christian texts, people with disabilities are expected to want to be healed. If any affirming construction of disability is to be found in this model, it is in the collection of a wide range of disabilities under the realm of those that might be healed, including blindness, mobility impairment, deafness, being non-verbal, being “vexed by an unclean spirit” (likely describing many forms of mental illness), those with physical “impairment” (OE *untrumnesse*, literally, “disorder”), and those “in poor health” (i.e., with chronic illness or disease). No single word in Old English encompasses all of these experiences of the body, but their collection together here suggests that they were recognized as all having something in common. There is a nascent sense of community in this grouping, hinting at the possibility of solidarity across forms of impairment and disability that is difficult to locate elsewhere in the Middle Ages. And that community is not as isolated from the general population as we might expect. The impaired body may be stigmatized, but it is embedded in a stigma associated with all bodies, not just those with disability; as Margaret says: “We are flesh and blood, always sinning and never ceasing.”

Bibliography

Bruce Wallace, Karen. “*Hælu* and *Unhælu*: The Anglo-Saxons’ Concept of the Nor-


After the Crucifixion and the Resurrection and the glorious Ascension of our Lord, Hælend° Christ, to God the Father Almighty, a great many martyrs suffered, and through that suffering attained eternal rest with the holy Thecla and Susanna. And a great many also were seduced by the devil’s teaching, that they worshipped dumb and deaf idols, the handiwork of men, which could provide advantages neither to themselves nor to anyone.

Now I, Theotimus, have learned through the grace of God from a certain number of books and eagerly meditated and inquired about the Christian faith, and have never found in books that any man might come to eternal rest, unless he truly believes in the Holy Trinity, that is Father and Son and the Holy Spirit, and that the Son took the form of man and suffered death for all mankind, just as is said here above. He illuminated the blind, gave hearing to the deaf, and awakened the dead to life, and he hears all those who truly believe in him. Thereupon I, Theotimus, eagerly wished to know how the blessed Margaret fought against the devil and overpowered him and then received that eternal crown of glory from God. Hear now all and witness how the blessed Margaret suffered in the name of God and through that toil came to eternal rest with the holy Thecla and Susanna.

The blessed Margaret was Theodosius’ daughter. He was a patriarch of the heathens; he worshipped idols and provided for his daughter. She was filled with the Holy Spirit and through baptism she was renewed. She was given to her foster mother to be raised, near the city of Antioch, and after her own mother had departed from this life, her foster mother loved her much more than she had before. She was greatly loathed by her father and greatly loved by God.

And when she was fifteen years old, she rejoiced to be in her foster mother’s house. She heard of the strife of the martyrs, because at that time the blood of many was poured out onto the earth for our Lord’s name, Hælend Christ, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit and entrusted her virginity to God.

One day, when she was watching her foster mother’s sheep with other women, who were much like her, Olibrius the prefect was traveling from Asia to the city of Antioch. When he saw the blessed Margaret sitting by the road, he immediately desired her and said to his thane: “Go hastily and seize that woman and ask her if she is free, so that I might take her to wife, and if she is a slave, I will render payment for her, and she will be as a concubine to me and there will be riches for her in my house.”

Then the soldiers went and seized her. The blessed Margaret began to call to Christ and said this: “Have mercy on me, Lord, and do not let my soul be undone by dishonorable men, but permit me to rejoice and praise you eternally and never let my soul nor my body become defiled. But send to my right side and to my left angels of peace to open my heart and to respond with boldness to this dishonorable man and these unjust executioners. I am now, Lord, just as cattle in the middle of a field and just as a sparrow in a net and just as a fish on a hook. Help me, my Lord, and hold me and do not forsake me into the hands of dishonorable men.”

The soldiers then came to the prefect and said, “Lord, you cannot take her, because she prays to the God who was executed by the Jews.” Olibrius the prefect commanded them to lead her to him, and said to her: “Of what kin are you? Tell me, are you free or a slave?” The blessed Margaret said to him: “I am free.” The prefect said to her: “Of what faith are you or what is your name?” She answered and said: “In the Lord I am called.” The prefect said to her: “Which god do you worship?” The holy Margaret said to him: “I pray to the

\[Hælend\] Healer/Savior  \[Antioch\] modern-day Antakya in Turkey
Almighty God and his Son, Hælend Christ, who holds my virginity undefiled to this present day.” The prefect said to her: “Do you call upon that Christ whom my fathers executed?” The holy Margaret said to him: “Your fathers executed Christ and thus they all perished, but he endures in eternity and his reign is forever without end.” The prefect was very angry and commanded the holy Margaret to be enclosed in prison until he thought of how he might destroy her virginity.

The prefect said to her: “If you do not pray to my god, my sword will become acquainted with your body and I will crush all your bones. If you listen to me and believe in my god, before all these people I say to you that I will take you as my wife and for you it will be as well as it is for me.” Margaret said to him: “For this reason I give up my body to torment, that my soul might rest with righteous souls.”

The prefect then commanded her hung up and with small switches violently flogged. The holy Margaret looked up to heaven and said: “In you, Lord, I trust, that I will not be harmed. Watch over me and have mercy on me from dishonorable hands and from the hands of these killers, lest my heart here be terrified. Send me wholeness[10] that I might be illuminated[11] by my torment and that my pain might come to gladden me.”

And when she had prayed thus, the killers beat her pure body so that her blood flowed on the earth like water does from the cleanest wellspring. The prefect said to her: “Alas, Margaret, submit to me and it will be well for you above other women.” And all the women who stood there wept bitterly for that blood and said: “Alas, you evil counsellors, go you wives to your houses and you men to your work! God is an ally to me. Therefore I do not wish to hear you, nor will I ever pray to your god, who is dumb and deaf. But believe in my God, who is mighty in power, and he immediately hears those who believe in him.”

And then she said to the prefect: “Alas, you vile dog, my God is an ally to me and, though you have power over my body, Christ protects my soul from your terrible hands.” Then the soldiers went and tortured her body, and the dishonorable prefect wrapped his face with his cloak, so that he might not look at her because of that blood and he said to the woman: “Why do you not obey my word and be merciful to yourself? Behold: your body is tortured at my terrible judgment. Consent to me and pray to my god, lest you be devastated unto death. If you do not listen to me, my sword shall have power over your body. If you do listen to me, before all these people I say to you that I will take you as my wife.” The holy Margaret said to him: “Alas, you are a fool! I thus give up my body to torment, so that my soul will be triumphant in heaven.”

The prefect commanded that she be enclosed in a dark prison, and when she had gone therein, she blessed all her body with the sign of Christ’s cross and began to bless herself with her hands and thus said: “Look upon me and have mercy on me, Lord, because I am alone in here, and my father has forsaken me. Do not forsake me, my Lord, but have mercy on me, because I understand that you are Judge of the living and the dead. Judge now between me and this devil. Behold, I suffer in my torments. Do not be angry with me, my Lord, because you know that
I give up my soul for you. You are blessed in all things.”

Then I, Theotimus, was providing her with bread and with water, and I saw through an eye-hole all her strife that she had with that dishonorable devil; and I wrote down all of her prayers.

Out of a corner of that prison there came a very terrible dragon of many colors. His hair and his beard seemed golden, and his teeth were like wrought steel, and his eyes shined like precious gems, and out of his nose went great smoke, and his tongue breathed out, and a great foulness he made in that prison. And he reared up and he hissed an immense noise. Then a great light came into that dark prison from the fire that burst from the dragon’s mouth. The holy woman became very afraid and bent her knees to the ground and extended her hands in prayer and said thus: “God Almighty, quench the strength of this great dragon and have mercy on me in my need and hardship and never let me perish, but shield me against this wild beast.”

And when she prayed thus to Christ, the dragon set his mouth over the holy woman’s head and swallowed her. But when the holy Margaret made the sign of Christ’s cross inside the dragon’s belly, it tore him in two, and the holy woman went out from the dragon’s belly unharmed. And at the same time she saw on her left side a devil sitting like a dark man, his hands bound upon his knees. And when she saw him, she prayed to Christ and said thus: “I praise and glorify you, resurrected Christ the King. You are the support of faith and the source of all wisdom and the foundation of all strength. Now I see my faith flourishing and my soul illumined and this dragon fallen in mortal defeat. I thank you, holy and resurrected God. You are Ælend of all healers. May your name be blessed in all things.”

And when she had thus prayed, the devil rose up and took the holy woman’s hand and said: “You have done enough. Depart from me, because I see you persist in continence. I sent my brother Rufus to you in the likeness of a dragon, so that he might devour you and your virginity, and that your beauty might perish and your memory be blotted out from this earth. You killed him with the sign of Christ’s cross and now you wish to kill me. But I bid you for the sake of your virginity, do not strike at me.” The holy Margaret then grabbed that devil by the hair and cast him to the ground and thrust out his right eye and she crushed all his bones and set her right foot over his neck and said to him: “Stay away from my virginity! Christ is an ally to me, because his name shines in all things.”

And when she had said this, there shone a very great light in that dark room and the cross of Christ was seen from earth up to heaven, and a white dove perched on that cross, and it spoke and said: “Speak to me, Margaret, you who through virginity have yearned for the eternal kingdom, which is therefore granted for you along with Abraham and with Isaac and Jacob.” Blessed are you that overpowered the fiend.” The holy Margaret then said: “You are glorious, Christ, you alone who make many wonders. I glorify and praise you, because you are holy and great in all things, you who deign to reveal to your handmaid that you alone are the sole hope of all who believe in you.”

The dove then spoke and said: “Margaret, ask him who you have under your foot about his deeds so that he will reveal all his work, and when you have overpowered him, you will come to me.” The holy Margaret then said to that devil: “What is your name, you unclean spirit?” The devil said to her: “You servant of Christ, lift your foot from my neck, so that I might rest my bones a little and I will tell you all of my deeds.” The holy woman then lifted her foot from his neck. And the devil then said: “I have seized many honest men and I fought against them and they could not overpower me. But you thrust out my eye and crushed all my bones and killed my brother. Now I see Christ dwells in you and you perform all work in righteousness. I blinded them to faith and I overthrew them from the heavenly happiness, and
when they were asleep, I came over them and when I might not take them from their bed, I caused them to sin in their sleep. And now by a serving woman I am overpowered. What shall I do now, when all my weapons are broken? And it troubles me most of all that your father and your mother were mine."

The holy woman said to him: “Tell me now your kind and from whence you come.” The devil said to her: “Tell me, Margaret, from whence is your life and your body and from whence is your soul and your faith, or else how has Christ been dwelling in you? Tell me this, then I will tell you all of my deeds.” The holy woman answered him and said: “It is not fitting for me that I say anything to you, because you are not worthy of hearing the sound of my voice. The commands of God I desire to hear and proclaim. And you, devil, be silent now, because I will not listen to a word out of your mouth.” And immediately the earth grimly swallowed up that bloodthirsty devil.

Then the next day, the prefect commanded that the holy woman be led to him, and when she was going out, she blessed all her body with the sign of Christ’s cross. The prefect said to her: “Alas, Margaret, submit to me and pray to my god.” The holy Margaret said to him: “Truly, it would be more fitting for you to pray to my God.” The prefect then became very angry and commanded that she be hung up and burned with candles and it was done as he commanded. The blessed Margaret then called out and said: “I will never pray to your god, who is dumb and deaf. Nor may you overpower a pure woman. Christ himself has blessed my body, and to my soul he will deliver a crown of glory.”

Olibrius the prefect commanded the death of all who believed in Christ, and they were killed in the field of Lim, outside the city of Armenia. And after that he commanded the killing of the blessed Margaret and that she be slain with a sword. The soldiers then led her outside the city walls and then one of them said (who was called by the name Malchus): “Extend your neck now and yield to my sword and have mercy on me, because I see here Christ standing among his angels with you.” Margaret then said: “I bid you, brother, if you see Christ here, honor me until I pray to him and entrust my spirit to him.” The soldier said to her: “Pray however you wish.”

The blessed Margaret then began praying and thus said: “God, you who made heaven by hand and who measure the earth in your grasp, hear my prayer that any person who writes of my suffering or hears it read, at that time let their sins be blotted out; or if anyone puts a light in my church from their labor, let whatever guilt for which they ask forgiveness not be tallied among their sins. I
ask you, Lord, that if any person might meet your terrible judgment and they might recall my name and yours, deliver them, Lord, out of torment. Furthermore I ask you, Lord, that anyone who makes a book of my martyrdom or has one in their house have all their sins remitted, because we are flesh and blood, always sinning and never ceasing. And furthermore I ask you, Lord, that one who builds a church in my name and there writes my martyrdom or purchases it through their labor, send to them, Lord, the Holy Spirit. And where there is the book of my martyrdom, let there not be born a child that is blind, nor halt, nor dumb, nor deaf, nor vexed by an unclean spirit, but let peace and love and truth be there. And any who prays there for the forgiveness of their sins, respond, Lord, to their prayer.

Then a voice came from heaven accompanied by thunder, and a dove came bearing a cross and said: “Arise, Margaret, blessed was the womb that bore you, because you have been mindful of all things in your prayer. Through the strength of angels I promise you that it will be as you ask, it will all be heard before the sight of God, and everything you were mindful of, that God grants you. God will set on your church three hundred angels for the purpose of receiving each of those people’s prayers, those who call in your name to the Lord that their sins be blotted out. Now furthermore, I proclaim to you that angels will come to you and take your head and lead it into paradise; and your body will be venerated among mankind, that whoever touches your relics, at that time will be healed from any impairment that he has. And where your relics are or the book of your martyrdom, neither evil nor unclean spirit will draw near there. But there will be peace and love and truth and joy and gladness. And those who invoke your name with all their heart and the shedding of tears, they will be delivered from all their sins. Blessed you are and those who trust in you and in the place where you are going. Come immediately to the place that is prepared for you and sit on the right side of the blessed Thecla and Susanna. Blessed are you who maintained your virginity. Come now, lamb of God, I await you.”

The holy Margaret looked at those who circled around her and said: “I ask on your behalf in the name of our Lord, Hælend Christ, that he forgive you of your sins and bring you to empowerment in the kingdom of heaven. I thank him who glorifies and honors me in the name of righteousness. I praise him and bless him who rules in all things.”

And after that prayer she raised herself up and said to that soldier: “Brother, take now your sword and slay me, because I will now overcome this earth.” He said: “I do not deem that just, nor will I kill a woman of holy God. God was speaking to you in front of me. I do not dare to do this.” The holy Margaret said to him: “If you do not do this, you will not have your part of paradise with me.” The soldier then with apprehension took his sword and struck off her head and turned and said: “Lord, do not count this as a sin for me,” and impaled himself with his sword and fell on the blessed woman’s right side. Thereafter a thousand angels came above the holy Margaret’s body and blessed him.

Then twelve angels came and took her head to their Father, and they sang and said: “You are holy, you are holy, you are holy, Lord God, Glory-king of hosts, the heavens and earth are filled with your glory.” And thus singing, they placed it in paradise. And all those who were in poor health, halt and blind, dumb and deaf, if they would touch the holy woman’s body, they were entirely healed. And the voice of angels was heard over her body, saying thus: “Blessed are you and those who believe through you, because you dwell in rest

**halt**: having an impairment that affects the ability to walk
until the end with holy women. And be not sorrowful for your holy body, because it is granted on earth that whichever person thus touches your relics or your bones, they at that time will have their sins blotted out and their name written in the Book of Life."

I, Theotimus, took the relics of that holy woman and I set them in a new shrine which I myself had previously made of stone and perfumed with sweet herbs, and I protected her in a certain good woman’s house. Her name was Sincletica. I, Theotimus, had ministered to her with bread and with water, and I saw all her strife that she had against those dishonorable devils, and I wrote down her prayer and sent it to all Christian people. And the holy Margaret fulfilled her martyrdom in the month of July, on the third and twentieth day. All that hear this be happy in heart, and those who pray in Lord Christ and believe in him, and think on the holy Margaret that she with her prayers might entrust us to the sight of Hælend Christ. To him may there be glory and love and honor and majesty and power and greatness in the world of all worlds, truly eternal without any end. Amen.
Endnotes

1 The text below was compiled and translated by Leah Pope Parker, from the manuscript, London, British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius A.iii, in consultation with the Old English text available in The Old English Lives of St. Margaret, ed. and trans. Mary Clayton and Hugh Magennis (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 112–48. Cotton Tiberius A.iii is available online at http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton_MS_Tiberius_A_III. Glosses and endnotes are also by Leah Pope Parker.

2 The “Healer” epithet is also present in other Germanic languages; for example, a ninth-century account of the life of Christ in Old Saxon is known as the Heliand.


4 Thecla and Susanna were Christian saints who in the Middle Ages were believed to have lived in the first and third centuries, respectively. Both women were ardent defenders of their virginity: Susanna became a martyr for refusing to marry a pagan, while Thecla engaged in combat and performed miracles to protect her virginity from repeated threats.

5 OE dumbe and deafe. In translating terms for impairments from the Old English, I use Present-Day English cognates where possible. Many of these terms carry stigma today—such as the more frequent use of “dumb” to mean “of low intelligence,” rather than “non-verbal”—which is not necessarily the same stigma they may have borne in the early Middle Ages. In retaining modern forms of the Old English words, even when the meaning has shifted, I aim to highlight the moral stigma associated with the language of disability in the Old English text and invite discussion of the etymological backgrounds of present uses of the language of disability.

6 E.g., John 9.

7 E.g., Mark 7:32–37.


9 The manuscript omits any name for Margaret here, perhaps in error, but it may also be a play on the sense of “being called” to the faith in contrast to “being called” a name.

10 OE hælo, meaning both physical health and spiritual wholeness; cf. Hælend, meaning both “Healer” and “Savior.”

11 OE onleoht; a form of the same word used earlier to describe Christ’s giving sight to the blind.

12 OE adiligian, which can also mean “destroy” or “obliterate,” potentially puns here on the similar OE word adlian, “to ail” or “to be sick.”

13 OE weorulde literally means “world,” but could refer to the temporal world, all of existence, or the eternal world of the Christian afterlife. In all instances, I translate as “all things” in order to encompass this ambiguity.

14 OE swilcne anne swærtna man. This could be a reference to skin color, but could also be a metaphorical reference to the devil’s moral “darkness,” especially given that the binding of the devil’s hands evokes the criminal punishment of fettering hands and feet in early medieval England. Either or both interpretations are possible because “dark” skin tones were both known about and present in early medieval England, as was a metaphorical association between literal darkness and moral iniquity in the Old English language.

15 OE anlyht, cf. onleoht, see note 11.

16 OE Þu eart ealra hælende Hælend.

17 The stories of Abraham, his son Isaac, and Isaac’s son Jacob are recounted in the Old Testament; see Genesis 11–35.

18 OE adumbe, the imperative form of adumbian “become unable to speak.”

19 OE lihtness, related to onleoht; see note 11.
While in literal terms, to be “vexed by an unclean spirit” evokes demonic possession, descriptions of possession and exorcism in other texts in Old English (and other medieval languages) suggest that this was not an uncommon interpretation of some symptoms of mental illness. For example, Bede’s *Prose Life of St Cuthbert* recounts the saint casting a devil from a woman who was afflicted such that she thrashed, wept, and cried out.

OE *innōþ*, meaning “inner parts,” “womb,” or “belly”; this same word is used for the belly of the dragon from which Margaret burst.

OE *untrumnesse*, literally, “disorder,” and frequently used in OE saints’ lives to describe individuals who seek healing from a saint.