

St Margaret, Patroness of Childbirth

The virgin martyr St Margaret of Antioch was a very popular saint in the late Middle Ages, in Iceland as well as elsewhere in the Christian world. An unusually large number of manuscripts telling her legend bear witness to her popularity in Iceland. These manuscripts were not only written during the Catholic period, *i.e.* before 1550. The legend was copied again and again after the Reformation. In this respect the legend of St Margaret is unique. The reason why St Margaret enjoyed this immense popularity seems to be her rôle as patroness of women in labour. Margaret was the saint most frequently invoked when a child was about to be born.¹

It is well known to the student of hagiography that martyrs' legends and legends of virgin martyrs follow a common narrative pattern and ideology.² The legend of St Margaret is therefore quite similar to other legends of saintly virgins. St Margaret is described as a great beauty with a will of iron. Her mother has died and her father, a heathen priest, shows her little love. The young Margaret revolts against him by converting to Christianity. At the age of fifteen, Margaret is noticed by a pagan nobleman, who wants her for his wife or concubine. In rejecting him, she rebels again against masculine power.

The rejection of the heathen suitor marks the beginning of St Margaret's *passio*; like other virgin martyrs she has not only her religion to protect but also her virginity. Whilst undergoing torture in prison, Margaret wishes that she might be allowed to see her real enemy, *i.e.* the devil himself. A tremendous dragon appears with snakes around its neck. Margaret is swallowed by the dragon but because of the strength of her faith the dragon bursts open and she escapes from its

¹ Jón Steffensen 1975, 208–215.

² Gad 1961, 53–54; Carlé 1985.

belly. Another and less popular version of the legend tells that she conquers the dragon by making the sign of the cross. A second devil appears and St Margaret conquers him by stepping on his neck. These two deeds are sometimes combined into one: The saint is frequently depicted standing with one foot on a fallen dragon. St Margaret's miraculous rescue from the dragon's belly is thought to be the reason why she attained her popular rôle as the patron saint of women in labour. In her legend her future rôle is alluded to in her last prayer:

Again I ask you, Lord, the man who writes the story of my passion or he that buys that book, fill him with your Holy Spirit. And in that house where that book is to be found, let there be no child born dead or lame. Forgive the sins of that person, Lord, who has my book in his keeping, if he asks you for mercy.³

This prayer lends a potency to books containing the legend of St Margaret, and it also explains why the legend was so frequently copied. Among the numerous manuscript copies there are ten manuscripts or fragments of a duodecimo size, the average size being 6 × 10 cm.⁴ In spite of their small size these manuscripts are often beautifully illuminated with pictures of St Margaret and the conquered dragon. The manuscripts also contain some other material, magic formulas and prayers to ease childbirth.⁵ Verses from the first and second chapters of the Gospel according to Luke are also to be found there. Prayers to the holy Virgin Mary are common, not surprisingly, as it was customary to invoke her in childbirth. It was believed that the Virgin Mary gave birth without pain because she was without original sin. One of the manuscripts has a well-known prayer for the absolution of sin, the so-called *Golden Prayer* (*Ave Maria, ancilla Trinitatis humillima*) attributed to St Bernard of Clairvaux. Prayers for repentance and the beginning of a penitential written for a woman appear in another. In the prayer quoted above St Margaret speaks of forgiveness

³ *Heilagra manna sögur* I 1877, 480 (My translation).

⁴ These manuscripts are AM 428 a–b 12mo, AM 429 12mo, AM 430 12mo, AM 431 12mo, AM 432 12mo and AM 433 a–d 12mo.

⁵ *Alfræði íslensk* III 1908–1918, 86–90; Bekker-Nielsen 1961, 52–58; Jón Steffensen 1975, 200; Ásdís Egilsdóttir 1990, 7–10.

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of sins. Childbirth could be dangerous in former times, and people must therefore have been concerned about the mother's soul if things went wrong. Throughout Europe it was believed that attending Mass and confession helped to ease childbirth. Women were therefore urged to confess and go to Mass in good time.⁶

The story of Margaret and the dragon is believed to be the main reason why St Margaret was connected with help in childbirth. She escaped intact from its belly in the same way as a child should be safely delivered from its mother's womb. The dragon is therefore a central theme in the legend of St Margaret. In the Middle Ages, the term "dragon" seems to have been used as a synonym for big reptiles, whether it was a dragon, serpent or even a snake and the Bible does not always distinguish between *draco*-dragon and *serpens*-serpent.⁷ The same applies to Old Norse, where *dreki* and *naðr* indicate the same monster.

In hagiographic literature a confrontation between a saint and a monster was commonplace, a confrontation which could be identified as a disguise of Satan or the forces of evil. St Margaret is therefore conquering evil forces in her legend. The dragon or snake has however not always been a symbol of evil. It has also been seen as a sign of regeneration and rebirth and has therefore been associated with mother goddesses.⁸ Similarities between the medieval cult of the Virgin Mary and devotion to pagan goddesses have also been noted. In folklore, Mary is a protective mother and paragon of fertility;⁹ she is often depicted standing over a serpent or dragon. In this guise she is shown as both Ecclesia and a second Eve predestined to bring about the redemption of humanity. Linking her with the serpent/dragon also draws attention to her similarities to mother goddesses.

Both the snake and the moon became symbols of immortal life. The lunar rhythm of renewal links the snake with menstruation. One of the penalties of eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, offered by the serpent, was menstruation, a curse which Mary was spared.

⁶ Franz 1909, 197.

⁷ Bernström 1980–1982, 267–270.

⁸ Peters 1992, 57–58; Moltmann-Wendel 1983, 27–29.

⁹ Holbek 1980–1982, 357–358.

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Numerous myths connect snakes with the moon. The snake appeared to be new or reborn each time it shed its skin, just as the moon is reborn each month. The power of the moon over fertility was also accepted. As the moon coincided with the menstrual cycle it appeared to control it. Both the snake/serpent and the moon were symbols of life and regeneration.¹⁰

In Eddic poetry and nordic myth both aspects of snakes, serpents or dragons are apparent. The serpent Miðgarðsormr lay in the sea around the world like a girdle and kept it together, but he also threatened the gods. The snake Niðhögggr lay under Yggdrasill, the tree of life, gnawing at its roots.

[A] hart bites it from above,
and it decays at the sides,
and Nidhogg rends it beneath.¹¹

Snorra-Edda describes the dwelling of murderers and perjurers in the following way:

I know a hall that stands far from the sun on Nastrand, the door faces north. Poison drops flow in through the smoke-hole. This hall is woven from snakes' backs. There shall wade heavy streams men who are perjured and murderers.

The worst place is in Hvergelmir, *Snorra-Edda* continues, where the Niðhögggr torments the bodies of the dead.¹²

Miðgarðsormr plays an important rôle in Ragnarök, when Thor will fight the serpent and die from the poison it spits into his face. Another version of the myth of Thor and Miðgarðsormr is thought to have existed in which Thor was able to kill the monster.¹³ It is Thor's role to keep the forces of the world in balance by his constant war with the giants, but he is also associated with fertility.¹⁴ The earth

¹⁰ Warner 1976, 268; Eliade 1958, 165–169.

¹¹ *Grímnismál* 1996, stanza 35.

¹² *Gylfaginning* 1982, ch. 52, Edda; see also *Völuspá* in *The Poetic Edda* 1996, stanza 39.

¹³ Turville-Petre 1964, 75–76.

¹⁴ Turville-Petre 1964, 93–94.

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was said to be his mother. Little is known of Sif, his wife, except that she had golden hair. It has been suggested that her golden hair, typifying the golden corn, represented her as an ancient fertility goddess.¹⁵

The ambiguous nature of the serpent is apparent in Norse mythology. The serpent (or dragon) can symbolize death and destruction but also has a protective rôle. *Miðgarðsormr* kept the world together. Gro Steinsland and Preben Meulengracht Sørensen have pointed out that *Miðgarðsormr*, *Niðhöggr* and *Fáfnir* indicate the heathen idea of a balance between chaos and order in the world.¹⁶ In that respect the serpent and the dragon are good and evil at the same time, symbolizing death and destruction while they also represent strength and protection.

The theme of a confrontation with a dragon or other monstrous beast is common in the folklore and mythology of numerous ancient cultures. Combat with a dragon is the most common myth in heroic tales and its most important theme. The dragon/serpent-combat myth is a creation-myth with the monster symbolizing chaos, the formless and desolate. When victory is won, chaos becomes cosmos. In order to preserve the form and order of the created world this primordial combat had to be re-enacted in a ritual.¹⁷ In the Judaic-Christian world similar ideas can be found:

You divided the sea by your might, you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. (Psalms 74:13–14).

St Margaret belongs of course to the Christian world, where we have an abundance of tales expressing victory over evil, where serpents and dragons, often maritime monsters, symbolize evil, sin and heathendom. The serpent in Eden is the devil himself. The Book of Revelations says (20:1–2):

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.

¹⁵ Davidson 1981, 84.

¹⁶ Steinsland and Meulengracht Sørensen 1994, 202.

¹⁷ Eliade 1974, 19, 69.

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The serpent in *Genesis* causes man to be driven out of paradise. This serpent is also believed to be the dragon that the archangel Michael fights in Revelations. Isaiah (ch. 27:1) tells that God will punish Leviathan, a dragon and a sea-monster, and God's victory over him is mentioned several times in the Bible. Chapter 12 in the Book of Revelations is of special interest because of its description of a seven-headed dragon threatening a woman about to give birth:

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth.

The woman in this chapter has been thought to be the personification of the church or the Virgin Mary. The sun-clad woman standing on the moon was meant to prefigure the assumption, but it also showed Mary's part in Christ's victory over Satan.¹⁸ It is rather strange that the woman in the *Apocalypse* screams in labour, which is contrary to all legends of the Virgin who gave birth without pain.

A dragon-combat takes place in several popular legends of the Middle Ages.¹⁹ St George of Cappadocia conquers a dragon and St Margaret is not the only female saint who does this masculine deed: St Martha of Bethany is just as victorious. Medieval Icelandic audiences knew Martha from the legend of the two supposed sisters Martha and Mary Magdalene. The legend begins with a description of St Martha, by saying that no books tell that she was ever married or had intimate relations with any man; she is a virgin like St Margaret. The battle with the dragon of Tarascon is central to the legend of St Martha. This dangerous dragon, begotten by the sea-monster Leviathan from the book of Job, threatens all life in the town. Martha confronts the dragon without fear. Like St Margaret, she has no weapons except her faith. She conquers the dragon with consecrated water and binds it with her belt. After that, the townspeople stone and beat it to death. Female heroes who defeat dragons are only found within the Christian world. When St Margaret has conquered

¹⁸ Warner 1976, 246–247.

¹⁹ Peters 1992, 27–28.

the dragon it shows its surprise by saying: “I do not know what to do; a girl has conquered me. I would not find this so remarkable if a man had done this deed.”²⁰

The legend of Martha is in many ways related to the legend of St George and St Martha is sometimes referred to as a female St George.²¹ He strikes the monster in a heroic, masculine way with his sword, but in the end he subdues the dragon by binding it with a virgin’s belt. As with St Margaret, St George’s existence in the real earthly world is doubtful and his legend has been traced to heathen myth (Perseus and Andromeda). St George, who amongst other rôles is a protector of women, conquers a dragon that dwelt in a cave by the sea and threatened all in the surrounding area. A young girl had to be sacrificed to him every day. By killing the dragon St George saved the life of a young princess about to be sacrificed.

There are no examples that show that Martha was invoked in childbirth, but her legend tells that she raised to life a young boy who had drowned. In her prayer she refers then to the event when her brother Lazarus was raised from the dead. The verse in the Gospel of St John which describes this incident, especially the words “Lazarus come forth” (11:44) is a well-known delivery prayer, calling the child out of the mother’s womb, bringing it forward from darkness into light. This verse is found in some of the aforementioned manuscripts of the legend of St Margaret.

When they conquer the dragons, Margaret and Martha appear in masculine rôles, that of strong powerful heroes. They thereby display the supernatural strength of the pure, saintly virgin who has rejected her sexuality and therefore conquered the weaknesses of her sex. The victories of Margaret and Martha are, in the Christian sense, victories over the devil and evil forces. God’s words in Genesis (3:15) have traditionally been interpreted as the first promise of a Redeemer. In Jerome’s *Vulgate* the passage reads thus, in English translation: “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel.”

²⁰ *Heilagra manna sögur* I 1877, 479.

²¹ Peters 1992, 50.

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Ever since the fourth century these words have been seen as a prophecy of the Virgin Mary, and the promised victory was interpreted as triumph of the second Eve, where the first had failed.²² When Christian symbolism makes Mary also a dragon-slayer the main point is to show her victory over evil by her purity and wisdom. But it should also be remembered that the dragon or serpent and the moon are also part of the symbolic world of fertility and life that are linked with the Virgin Mary.²³

Sigurðr Fáfnisbani is one of the most famous dragon-slaying heroes of the Germanic world. It is interesting to note that two eddic poems that tell the story of Sigurðr refer to knowledge of help in childbirth. In *Fáfnismál* there are several stanzas with a dialogue in which Sigurðr learns wisdom from Fáfnir after he has pierced the dragon's heart with his sword. Sigurðr asks the dragon the following question:

Tell me, Fafnir, you are said to be wise
and to know a great deal;
which are those norns who go to those in need
and choose mothers over children in childbirth?²⁴

The valkyrie Sigdrífa gives Sigurðr good advice and teaches him sacred knowledge. From her he learns runes to be used when a child is being born:

Helping-runes you must know if you want to assist
and release children from women.
They shall be cut on palms and clasped on the joints
and then the disir asked for help.²⁵

The Germanic hero Sigurðr and the virgin martyr Margaret of Antioch seem therefore to have two things in common: they have both conquered dragons and both are connected with help in childbirth. Another hero of the north, yet another, is also interesting in this

²² Warner 1976, 244–245.

²³ Warner 1976, 269.

²⁴ *Fáfnismál* in *The Poetic Edda* 1996, stanza 12.

²⁵ *Sigrdrífumál* in *The Poetic Edda* 1996, stanza 9.

connection — the viking Ragnar loðbrók, yet another winner in a dragon-combat. As dragon slayers (or conquerors), Margaret, Sigurðr and Ragnar all become connected with the myth of creation, each in his or her own way.

Rory McTurk in his important and extensive study of Ragnars saga has pointed out that the name *Loðbrók* (hairy breeches) could have been adapted from a more original female form of the name, *Loðbróka*.²⁶ He draws attention to a twelfth century runic inscription from the Orkneys which reads as follows: „Sjá haugur var fyrr hlaðinn heldr Loðbrókar, synir hennar þeir voru hvatir,” which in English translation reads: “This mound was raised earlier than Loðbrók’s; her sons they were bold.” He also points to the concluding chapter of the youngest version of Ragnars saga, dating from the 13th century, where an ancient wooden man, *trémaður*, set up as an idol, recites several strophes in which the sons of Loðbróka are also mentioned.

McTurk has shown that the manuscript uses the feminine form of the word *loðbrók*, a fact that has been ignored by editors. His theory is, in short, that Loðbróka is a variation on the word Loðkona, quoting the Swedish scholar Jöran Sahlgren, who thought that Loðkona could be related to the Swedish place-name Locknevi, Loðkonuvé or the sacred place of Loðkona. Both names, Loðbróka and Loðkona, could be related to the name Lóður, believed to be a fertility deity.²⁷ Lóður is only mentioned in *Völuspá*, where he takes part in the creation of man with Óðinn and his brother Hænir:

breath gave Odin, spirit gave Hænir
vital spark gave Lodur, and fresh complexions.²⁸

According to Sahlgren, the original form of the name Lóður was Loðver, hairy man or a man covered with grass or leaves, and Loðkona is therefore a feminine form of Loðver. Sahlgren also suggested that Loðkona had been used as a “noa-name” for a fertility goddess. Mc-

²⁶ McTurk 1991, 6–39 and 1991, 343–359.

²⁷ Sahlgren 1918, 33.

²⁸ *Völuspá* in *The Poetic Edda*, stanza 18.

Turk draws attention to the fact that the names Ragnar and Loðbrók are linked together for the first time in the *Book of Icelanders* by Ari the learned, dated with some accuracy to 1122–1133. His hypothesis is that the original Loðbróka was the mother of five sons of Ragnar and a serving priestess, and hence that they were named after the fertility goddess. Stories of the historical Ragnar or Reginheri became popular and widespread, and therefore they soon took on the structure of the traditional heroic tale which also had absorbed a creation myth. Later the names Ragnar and Loðbrók were combined and attributed to the same person.

The relationship between myth and heroic tale is complex, but one aspect of this relationship is the ritual reflection of the myth, when human beings re-enact the story. The story is then brought closer to the human world and becomes human, without losing the supernatural elements altogether. Gradually however, the ancient religious meaning disappears and what is left is a human heroic tale. Ragnar's first heroic deed, the dragon slaying, could have been re-enacted and used as an initiation rite where the participants would have worn hairy breeches.²⁹

Initiation of the young played an important part in all cultures and initiation rites were expressed in ritual and myth. For example, Jan de Vries has pointed out that the transition from boyhood to manhood was interpreted as the death of childhood and rebirth into a new life among adults. Models of this kind of rebirth were found in creation myths, which frequently represented organized life as arising out of chaos, often in the form of a fight in which a god slays a monster.³⁰ The dragon-episode in the tales of Sigurðr can easily be seen as an initiation ritual where the boy disappears and a hero is born.

The Nordic myth of the creation is also the consequence of a killing: the world is created out of the body of the dead giant Ýmir. There is a close connection between initiation and fertility. The newly initiated are ready to choose a mate and beget children. It is therefore not surprising that a young hero saves a young girl from danger by

²⁹ McTurk 1991, 36–37.

³⁰ De Vries 1963, 214–229.

killing the monster.³¹ An example of this occurs in the saga of Ragnar; the hero Ragnar loðbrók wins the young and beautiful Thora after he has killed the serpent which grew so big that it surrounded her house. This is probably also one of the reasons why popular tales have combined the legends of George and Martha into one. After initiation the young grown-up becomes a fully qualified member of the society. He has to make himself familiar with the sacred traditions of his tribe and learn mythical traditions and knowledge, just as Sigurðr does in *Fáfnismál* and *Sigrdrífumál*.

A dragon conquest is an interpretation of rebirth and creation. There are also obvious connections between birth and creation. The heroic deed of Sigurðr is an initiation and at the same time he is re-enacting the myth of creation. In that light the quoted above verse from *Fáfnismál* becomes understandable and important. Creation myths are the most important myths that man has told and retold. The myth of the creation of the world was recited in connection with fertility of men and animals, childbirth and agricultural activities.³² When the virgin martyr St Margaret conquers a dragon she is conquering evil, but she is also taking part in re-enacting an ancient myth of creation.

The belief in the curing power of the Christian-Judaean creation myth was widespread during the Middle Ages, and it was also supposed to be helpful in childbirth. The beginning of the Gospel of John, where the creation is mentioned, is written on an Icelandic parchment belt (*Kveisublað*) that was used against various diseases. The so-called prayer of St Leonard, which begins with the story of the creation, is written in two of the tiny manuscripts of the legend of St Margaret that have been preserved and is an indication that the creation myth was used to ease childbirth.³³

The legend of St Margaret is a typical story of a Christian virgin martyr. The central character is a young girl who rejects the tradi-

³¹ De Vries 1963, 221.

³² Eliade 1974, 25.

³³ Jón Steffensen 1975, 200–201; Kummer 1927–1942; Magnús Már Lárusson 1952, 81–90. Bekker-Nielsen 1961, 52–58.

tional female rôle. Nevertheless she becomes the protector of child-bearing. This seems to be the reason why the cult of St Margaret and her legend have been so widespread. I have tried to link St Margaret with ancient myths and symbols, which are all in some way connected with childbirth and fertility. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for St Margaret's popularity; her legend retained ancient ideas, handed down from generation to generation, keeping their value even after they had been adapted to Christianity.

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