

# The First Reformation

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## Abstract.

There is a school of thought which considers that there was only ever one *Reformation* in Scotland - that which took place c.1560 and which was responsible for the asset-stripping of the Latin Church by the middle-ranking gentry. This brief paper hopes to remind scholars that there was another *Reformation* - that which was encouraged by St Margaret and her husband, King Malcolm (Canmore), and which saw the Early Church in Scotland being supplanted by the Latin Church and European ways.

This *First Reformation* was as far-reaching in its effect as the more well-known *Second Reformation*. It is sometime said that Scotland has tried to draw a veil over the Latin Church of the medieval period and, relegated hundreds of years of history to obscurity as if we should be ashamed of it. In the same way, it has neglected the Early Church period previous to the First Reformation and this has impoverished our grasp of the country's heritage. The Early Church represents over four hundred years of Scotland's ecclesiastical history - the same length of time that Presbyterianism has held sway. If we add to this the five hundred years of the Latin Church's existence, then we instantly see that we are in peril of casting aside and ignoring two-thirds of the ecclesiastical history of our land. Can any serious historian do this with a clear conscience?

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The marriage of King Malcolm III,<sup>1</sup> known as Malcolm Canmore (d.1093), and the part-English princess, Margaret I, in c.1070, heralded a period of major change for the Scottish Church. Details of the princess's early life and development are best left to others to tell, however, we must note one over-arching fact - she was brought up to know the traditions of the Church in continental Europe and this was further entrenched during her time at the English Court and her friendship with Lanfranc, archbishop of Canterbury. The religious character of the young woman who found her way eventually to the Scottish Court was already moulded in adherence to the norms of the Latin Church. If we are to believe the stories which are told then we must also accept that Margaret's faith was deep-rooted and intense, which led her to be seen by those around her as being something of a zealot and, in time, to be considered a Saint.

We should also spare a thought for her husband. He, also, had spent his formative years at a 'continental' Court (in England) and what religious faith he retained from this experience was very much of a Latin Rite form. However, Malcolm was a man's man, trained in knightly ways, and we can not be certain that his faith was a predominant part of his personality. It is astonishing to find that he is said to have been unable to read, but he did value books and he made presents of them to his young wife on a number of occasions.

However, it was inevitable that Margaret's deep convictions would find her at variance with the Church she found in her husband's kingdom.

Queen Margaret's biographer, Turgot,<sup>2</sup> famously reported her condemnation of indigenous Scottish liturgical customs in the following terms:

*Praeterea in aliquibus locis Scottorum quidam fuerant, qui contra totius ecclesiae consuetudinem, nescio quo ritu barbaro, Missas celebrare consueverant: quod Regina, zelo Dei accensa, ita destruere atque annihilare studuit, ut deinceps qui tale quid praesumeret, nemo in tota Scottorum gente appareret.*<sup>3</sup>

[Again, there were certain places in Scotland in which Masses were celebrated according to some sort of barbaric<sup>4</sup> rite, contrary to the usage of the whole Church. Fired by the zeal of God, the Queen attempted to root out and abolish this custom, so that henceforth there was not one single person among the whole Scottish people who dared to continue the practice.]

Turgot, unfortunately, does not tell us in what ways the rites could be considered 'barbarous'. We should also question the last part of Turgot's statement. For we learn that the Culdees, long after St Margaret's days, were permitted to observe in their own churches or chapels a rite different from that which was followed by the majority of the Scottish clergy. It is tempting to suggest that the rite which was preserved by the Culdees was that very form of the Mass which Turgot described as 'barbarous' and which he insists that the Queen found so objectionable! Turgot also adds that the Queen was zealous in reforming a number of the common practices of the people, amongst which was that of failing to properly observe the Lord's Day - the Sabbath. She also decried certain customs with regard to marriage - that it should not be acceptable for a man to marry his step-mother, nor, that a surviving brother should take to wife the widow of his deceased brother - both of which had become acceptable throughout the country. Margaret not only *reformed* the practices of the Church, she also *innovated*. Having observed that many people neglected to give due thanks to God after meals, she introduced the practice of herself drinking a health at rising from table, in honour of those of her guests who had given thanks to the Almighty. Hence it was called the *Grace Drink*, or *St Margaret's Blessing*. But these things are not items of Faith, rather of practice, and this reflects the truth of matters. The Church that Margaret found in Scotland, although it varied somewhat in matters of practice, was absolutely orthodox in matters of religious Faith.

The Church that Margaret encountered on marrying into the Scottish royal line lacked the *uniformity* in its *constitutions* and organization to which she would have

become accustomed in her youth. In this respect it resembled its counterpart in England at the time of the Conquest. However, the Norman takeover south of the border was hostile, and brought in its wake incessant friction between Church and State. In Scotland the making of the kingdom had been bloody, but the integration of the territories of the former Alba in the north with the Lothians and Galloway in the south-east and west, respectively, had at least been achieved from within and not by some outside foreign power.

A close, if initially undefined, relationship existed between Church and State. Both were highly receptive to external religious influences at a time that was in any case characterized by a drive towards liturgical uniformity across the whole of Europe. However, the idea that the importation of new liturgical customs to the virtual extinction of old indigenous usage amounted to an assault on nationalistic sentiment seems wide of the mark.

Dauvit Broun argues that under the rule of King Malcolm and Queen Margaret and their immediate heirs, Gaelic as a language for writing was by no means necessarily threatened, let alone ousted by Anglo-French; rather a *modus vivendi* operated between the two.<sup>5</sup> While Margaret was undoubtedly responsible for initiating liturgical reform in Scotland, and presumably, like her confessor Turgot, regarded Rome as the ultimate liturgical authority, her view of indigenous Scottish Use may not have been so hostile as is sometimes claimed. Not only was she tolerant of existing religious communities within Scotland – such as those at Iona, St Andrews, Loch Leven and Laurencekirk – she was, in fact, actively generous towards them.

Conservatism may well have been a factor behind the inevitable tensions between old and new, but, in all likelihood, the much later concept of ‘our awin Scottis Use’, with its overtones of patriotism, would have been incomprehensible to the subjects of Malcolm III. Many students now recognize the idea as the rather pretentious invention of a later Protestant church looking to establish its authority by making links with ‘the old ways’ and claiming that the Church of Scotland was the true inheritor of that fabulous creature - the *Celtic Church!*

*Tamen non est ita!*

## References.

- <sup>1</sup> It should be remembered that, Máel Coluim mac Donnchada (Malcolm III), when aged about nine, was taken away into exile for 'safe keeping' following the death of his father. We are told that this was either to the Northern Isles to seek the protection of the Earl of Orkney, Thorfinn Sigurdsson, or to the English court and the protection of Edward the Confessor. In either case, he was absent from Scotland for the whole of the reign of his father's killer, Macbeth – a period of some seventeen years – during which time he was brought up in a thoroughly alien environment and exposed to the customs of the wider European world.
- <sup>2</sup> Turgot, Prior of the Cathedral Monastery of Durham, was consecrated Bishop of St Andrews at York on the 1st August 1109; he died on 31st of August 1115 and is buried in the Chapter House at Durham.
- <sup>3</sup> *Statuta Ecclesie Scotticanae*, ed. J. Robertson, XXIII (Edinburgh, 1866), n.2. English translation adapted from *Turgot, Life of St Margaret, Queen of Scotland*, trans. William Forbes-Leith S.J. (Edinburgh, 1884), 48-9.
- <sup>4</sup> I have chosen to use 'barbaric' here rather than 'barbarous' since the Latin *barbaro* should be translated to reflect the usage of the term in the ancient world to signify 'foreign' and does not carry with it any implication of pagan religions which would have been thought 'barbarous'. Indeed, my own belief here is that the word 'foreign' would be a better choice in the translation. Turgot simply meant that the rite which Margaret encountered was not orthodox, i.e. not to be found elsewhere in the mainland of Europe that she had known in her youth and must have originated from the Church of some foreign country.
- <sup>5</sup> Broun, D., 'Gaelic Literacy in Eastern Scotland between 1124 and 1249', in *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies*, ed. Huw Pryce (Cambridge, 1998), 183-201.

