

St. Margaret of Antioch. (Marina).

Third or Fourth Century.

Although Margaret is a popular and influential, she was almost certainly a fictitious character. Pope Gelasius declared her legend to be apocryphal as early as the year 494. Theotimus, Margaret's servant, claimed to be an eye-witness to his mistress's death. She is not referred to in ancient liturgy, nevertheless her cult spread from the east and became popular in the Middle Ages and particularly during the Crusades.

According to legend, Aedisius, Margaret's father, was a pagan priest who threw Margaret out of the house when she became a Christian, forcing her to become a shepherdess. The prefect of Antioch, Olybrius, became enamoured of her and, when she spurned him, he denounced her to the authorities as a Christian and she was made to undergo a whole series of terrible tortures.

One of the most horrible of her tortures was to be swallowed by the devil in the form of a dragon.

However, the cross which she was carrying scratched his throat so much that he was forced to regurgitate her, she emerged unharmed.

The attempts of the authorities to execute her by fire and drowning were ineffectual, but those who had assembled to watch the execution were converted by the miracle they saw and were converted and executed in their turn. Eventually, Margaret, with most of her converts, was beheaded in the persecutions of Diocletian. She was buried in Antioch, but, the story goes that her relics were stolen and taken to San Pietro della Valle and from there to Montefiascone in 1145. In 1213, it was also claimed that her remains were taken to Venice.

Her cult.

Many benefits were associated with her invocation, one of them being a promise that all those who followed her would receive a heavenly crown. The reason that she is said to be the patron of safe childbirth must be that she emerged from the dragon's belly unharmed. She is also said to have promised to anyone who called upon her on their deathbed that they would be saved from the clutches of the devil. Many churches were dedicated to her, especially in Norfolk and many 'lives' were written. In art, she is popular - seen coming out of the dragon's belly and transfixing it with a long cross. Joan of Arc claimed that Margaret's voice was one of those which told her to save France. She was also reputed to be one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers. Her cult was suppressed in 1969.