

# ‘In me porto crucem’: a new light on the lost St Margaret’s *crux nigra*

FRANCESCO MARZELLA

## ABSTRACT

St Margaret of Scotland owned a reliquary containing a relic of the True Cross known as *crux nigra*. Both Turgot, Margaret’s biographer, and Aelred of Rievaulx, who spent some years at the court of Margaret’s son, King David, mention the reliquary without offering sufficient information on its origin. The Black Rood was probably lost or destroyed in the sixteenth century. Some lines written on the margins of a twelfth-century manuscript containing Aelred’s *Genealogia regum Anglorum* can now shed a new light on this sacred object. The mysterious lines, originally written on the Black Rood or more probably on the casket in which it was contained, claim that the relic once belonged to an Anglo-Saxon king, and at the same time they seem to convey a significant political message.

In his biography of St Margaret of Scotland,<sup>1</sup> Turgot († 1115),<sup>2</sup> at the time prior of Durham, mentioned an object that was particularly dear to the queen. It was a cross known as *crux nigra*. In chapter XIII of his *Vita sanctae Margaretae*, Turgot tells how the queen wanted to see it for the last time when she felt death was imminent.<sup>3</sup>

Ipsa quoque illam, quam Nigram Crucem nominare, quamque in maxima semper veneratione habere consuevit, sibi afferri præcepit. Sed cum locus, in quo fuerat inclusa, citius aperiri non posset, regina graviter ingemiscens, ait: ‘O nos miseros! O culpabiles! ulterius sanctæ crucis non merebimur aspectum.’ Quandoque tamen de loculo prolatam, eique allatam cum reverentia suscepit, complecti, deosculari, oculos, faciem illa significare crebrius studuit. Jamque, frigescente toto corpore, nihilominus tamen ipsa semper orabat; et quinquagesimum Psalmum ex ordine decantans, crucem interim sibi ante oculos statuens, utraque manu tenebat.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On St Margaret of Scotland, see C. Keene, *Saint Margaret, Queen of the Scots: a Life in Perspective* (New York, 2013). See also R. Rushforth, *St Margaret’s Gospel-Book: the Favourite Book of an Eleventh-Century Queen of Scots* (Oxford, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> On Turgot’s life and career, see e.g. A. W. M. Aird, *St Cuthbert and the Normans: the Church of Durham 1071–1153* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 249–51.

<sup>3</sup> Latin text from *Symeonis Dunelmensis Opera et Collectanea*, ed. J. Hodgson Hinde, Surtees Soc. 51 (Durham, 1868), I, 252–3.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Moreover, she asked that a cross, called the Black Cross, which she always held in the greatest veneration, should be brought to her. There was some delay in opening the chest in which it

Turgot does not tell much about the relic and the reliquary. For example, he does not explain why it was called *nigra crux*, even though we can easily suppose it was due to the dark colour of its wood. What we learn from Turgot is that Margaret had a great devotion towards it – as demonstrated by her final will to see and touch the relic before dying, as an extreme act of veneration for the cross – and that the cross was kept in a *loculus*,<sup>5</sup> a casket, that could be opened to extract the relic and venerate it. It is worth mentioning that in the abridgment of the Life of St Margaret in John of Tynemouth's *Sanctilogium Angliae, Walliae, Scotiae et Hiberniae* (also known as *Nova legenda Anglie*)<sup>6</sup> the reliquary is called *Crucem Scotie nigram*,<sup>7</sup> the Black Rood of Scotland, and this suggests that the personal devotion of the saintly queen for this relic, as much prestigious as mysterious, was at some point so widely spread that the relic itself became a national symbol. Nevertheless, although stressing the importance of this holy object, Turgot – who being the chaplain of Queen Margaret surely had the chance to see the reliquary – does not add any information about its aspect and, most of all, its provenance and origin.

A later text offers us more details. In the part of the *Genealogia Regum Anglorum* devoted to the pious life of Margaret's son, David of Scotland, now known as *De uita David regis*,<sup>8</sup> in paragraph X, Aelred tells how David imitated his mother when he was about to die. As the queen did, when his sickness got worse David wanted to be brought to the oratory to attend his last mass, and then asked to see the reliquary. This is how Aelred described the sacred object:<sup>9</sup>

Igitur clericorum atque militum manibus in oratorium deportatus, post missarum sollemnia, uenerandam sibi crucem, quam nigram uocant, produci sibi petiit adorandam. Est autem crux illa longitudinem habens palme de auro purissimo mirabili opere fabricata, que in modum thece clauditur et aperitur. Cernitur in ea quedam dominice crucis

was kept, during which the queen, sighing deeply, exclaimed, "O unhappy that we are! O guilty that we are! Shall we not be permitted once more to look upon the Holy Cross!" When at last it was got out of the chest and brought to her, she received it with reverence, and did her best to embrace it and kiss it, and several times she signed herself with it. Although every part of her body was now growing cold, still as long as the warmth of life throbbed at her heart she continued steadfast in prayer. She repeated the whole of the Fiftieth Psalm, and placing the cross before her eyes, she held it there with both her hands.' See W. Forbes-Leith, *The Life of St Margaret, Queen of Scotland by Turgot, Bishop of St Andrews* (Dunfermline, 1980), p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> The same word is used in the *Itinerarium Egeriae* (37, 1) to describe the casket containing the *lignum crucis*: 'affertur loculus argenteus deauratus, in quo est lignum sanctum crucis, aperitur et profertur, ponitur in mensa tam lignum crucis quam titulus'.

<sup>6</sup> See *Nova Legenda Anglie: as collected by John of Tynemouth, John Capgrave, and others*, ed. C. Horstman (Oxford, 1901), vol. 2, p. 174.

<sup>7</sup> See also the apparatus of Hinde's edition on p. 252.

<sup>8</sup> See *Aelredi Rievallensis Opera hagiographica et historica*, ed. D. Pezzini, CCCM 3 (Turnhout, 2017), 78\*-91\*.

<sup>9</sup> Latin text *ibid.* pp. 16–17.

portio, sicut sepe multorum miraculorum argumento probatum est, Saluatoris nostri imaginem habens de ebore decentissime sculptam, et aureis distinctionibus mirabiliter decoratam. Hanc religiosa regina Margareta, huius regis mater, que de semine regio Anglorum et Hungariorum extitit oriunda, allatam in Scotiam, quasi munus hereditarium transmisit ad filios. Hanc igitur crucem, omni Scotorum genti non minus terribilem quam amabilem, cum rex deuotissime adorasset, cum multis lacrimis peccatorum confessionum premissa, exitum suum celestium mysteriorum perceptione muniuit.<sup>10</sup>

Aelred makes a distinction between the golden cross, the *uenerandam crucem* etc., and the relic in it. Strictly speaking, in this passage the name *nigra crux* seems to apply to the cross-shaped reliquary only – *uenerandam (...) crucem (...) est autem crux illa (...) cernitur in ea* all grammatically refer to the first cross, called *nigra*, namely the reliquary – but Aelred here is quite ambiguous and it seems more than plausible that the name designates the whole object (the reliquary and relic kept inside). After all, the first *ueneranda crux* is golden, so why should it be called *nigra*? We can suppose the name initially designated the relic and then also the reliquary containing it.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, there is much we learn from Aelred's description.

*Dimensions.* The reliquary was the length of a palm, that means approximately 7.5 cm.<sup>12</sup> A small measure, much smaller than that of comparable examples coming from Britain, like the Anglo-Saxon reliquary cross kept in the Victoria and Albert Museum (height: 18.5 cm) or the Brussels cross (46.5 cm) attributed to a certain *Drabmal*. Too small to be a processional cross, it was not even a hanging cross: both Turgot and Aelred suggest that the precious object was occasionally held in its owner's hands to be venerated.

<sup>10</sup> 'He was therefore carried to the oratory on the hands of the clerics and soldiers, and after the solemnity of the mass he asked that the venerable cross that people call "black" be brought for him to adore. This cross, the length of the palm of the hand, was made with surpassing skill out of pure gold; it opens and closes like a box. In it can be seen a portion of the Lord's cross, as has been often proved by the evidence of the many miracles. It bears the image of our Saviour carved from the most beautiful ivory and is marvellously adorned with golden ornaments. The devout Queen Margaret, the king's mother, who sprang from the royal seed of the English and Hungarians, passed on to her sons as a hereditary gift this cross that she had brought to Scotland. When the king had with utter devotion adored the cross held no less in awe than in love by all the scottish [sic!] people, and had made confession of his death by receiving the heavenly mysteries.' From *Aelred of Rievaulx: the Historical Works of Aelred of Rievaulx*, trans. J. P. Freeman, ed. M. L. Dutton (Kalamazoo, MI, 2005), pp. 63-4.

<sup>11</sup> On Aelred's ambiguity, see G. Watson, 'The Black Rood of Scotland', *Scottish Ecclesiastical Society Transactions* 2 (1906-9), 27-46, at 30: 'The chronicler here quoted [i.e. Aelred] is a little misleading; it is evident from the above that the name "Black Rood" was then applied to the whole relic-cruciform case as well as the cross contained in it.'

<sup>12</sup> R. Rushforth writes that the Black Rood was 'about an ell long: a Scottish ell is roughly equivalent to a metre, and a English ell rather longer, but at this date it might simply mean an arm's length'. See Rushforth, *St Margaret's Gospel-Book*, p. 86. Unfortunately, the source suggesting that the Black Rood had the dimension of an ell (instead of a palm, as referred to by Aelred) is not mentioned.

*Materials and shape.* The reliquary was made of gold and was finely decorated. According to Aelred, the figure of the Crucified Christ carved in ivory was positioned over the portion of the True Cross (and not over the cross-shaped reliquary), and it was also decorated with gold. We must conclude that gold and ivory made it visible and distinct from the black to which it was attached and that the portion of the True Cross was also cross-shaped. Given the length of the reliquary, it seems strange though that the figure of Christ was inside the golden cross, completely hidden in it. The verb *cernitur* suggests that the smaller cross was visible when the reliquary was closed and maybe the figure could just protrude from the golden cross.

*Function.* The portion of the True Cross was kept inside the decorated cross, which could be opened in order to show its contents. It could be opened and closed like a case – Aelred argues – so one might imagine that there must have been two little doors. Aelred does not mention any *loculus*.

*Miracles.* Miracles were attributed to the cross and we can suppose that the miraculous fame of the cross contributed to increase the devotion of the Scottish people. The attributes of the *crux nigra* are three: the cross received veneration (*ueneranda*), devotion and love (*amabilis*), but it was also awe-inspiring (*terribilis*).

*Inheritance.* The reliquary was inherited by Margaret's sons, evidently because of the queen's will. This confirms the great importance it had for David's mother, and it also shows how it was perceived as a dynastic possession.

Thanks to Aelred's description, we come to a deeper understanding of how the *crux nigra* appeared and why it was considered so precious. Later witnesses tell the rest of the story. In 1291 Edward I charged Adam, abbot of Holyrood, and Ralph, abbot of Dunfermline, with the task of inspecting all the records kept in Edinburgh castle. Among other documents and treasures they found 'unum scrinium argenteum deauratum in quo reponitur crux quae vocatur la blak Rode':<sup>13</sup> the Black Rood was kept in a silver gilt casket, possibly still the *loculus* mentioned by Turgot. All they found was moved to Berwick in the same year. When marching through Scotland in 1296, Edward I brought the Black Rood with him, probably considering its possession 'not so much a strengthening of his own power as a weakening of the Scots'.<sup>14</sup> The sacred relic was successively returned to Scotland in 1328 and lost again by the Scots during the battle of Neville's Cross (1346), when it was found upon David II. It was kept in Durham cathedral and the lack of records of it after the Reformation leads to the conclusion that it was destroyed under Henry VIII.

<sup>13</sup> 'A gilt silver chest in which is placed the cross that is called la blak Rode'. For the Latin text, see J. Ayloffe, *Calendars of the Ancient Charters, of the Welch and Scottish Rolls, now remaining in the Tower of London* (London, 1774), p. 330.

<sup>14</sup> Watson, 'The Black Rood of Scotland', p. 38.

The story of the Black Rood after the death of Queen Margaret is sufficiently documented, but not much is known about its provenance. Aelred refers that it was brought to Scotland by Margaret, who came *de semine regio Anglorum et Hungariorum*.<sup>15</sup> Margaret, the daughter of Prince Edward the Exile and granddaughter of Edmund Ironside, spent the first years of her life in Hungary because of her father's exile after Knut's accession to the English throne. Does Aelred mention Margaret's Hungarian connections to suggest that she brought the relic from Hungary? Surely not explicitly, and the matter of the origin of the reliquary remains a tricky one, as already stressed by George Watson: 'Whence, then, is its origin? If the question has ever been raised, no writer ... has yet given the answer.'<sup>16</sup>

A manuscript witness could now shed a new light on this mysterious reliquary and its precious relic. It is found in one of the most authoritative witnesses of the *Genealogia regum Anglorum*, London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius F. iii, a twelfth-century manuscript coming from Rievaulx, Aelred's abbey. The manuscript, partially damaged by the fire of 1731, contains aelredian hagiographical and historical texts followed by a *Passio s. Agathe*.<sup>17</sup> The text of the *Genealogia* appears on 44r–68r and it is in the lower margins of 50v and 51r that some mysterious lines, otherwise unknown, can be found. The main text in these folios corresponds to the part of par. X in which our relic is described, but in the lower margins the following text(s) was written down by a different hand.

On 50v:

Me rex scottorum construxit damilada natus.  
ac Margareta deo gemmis ornavit et auro.  
In me porto crucem quam rex edmundus hēbat.  
Qua posita trenus martir et episcopus extat.

On 51r:

Vite reliquias celsas miracula monstrant.  
Hiis simul et properat ornatrix insula tota.  
Agnus in eterna aula illis premia prebet.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> 'From the royal stock of the English and Hungarians'.

<sup>16</sup> Watson, 'The Black Rood of Scotland', p. 29.

<sup>17</sup> For a description, see *Aelredi Rievallensis Vita sancti Ædwardi regis et Confessoris: Anonymi Vita sancti Ædwardi uersifite*, ed. F. Marzella, CCCM 3A (Turnhout, 2017), 19–20.

<sup>18</sup> Aelred Squire noticed the lines and in his *Aelred of Rievaulx: a Study* (London, 1981) p. 164, n. 42, wrote: 'There would seem to have been a Rievaulx tradition about this cross for in the MS from there, now Cotton Vitellius F. iii, there are some verses about it at the foot of the charred pages of fol. 50v and 51r.' These lines did not go unnoticed by the modern editor of the *Genealogia*, who on p. 88\*, n. 32, wrote: 'In the Rievaulx manuscript (*R*), the twelfth century scribe has copied some verses as if they were pronounced by a speaking cross: "Me rex Scottorum construxit Damilada natus / Ac Margareta Deo gemmis ornavit et auro / In

This is a classic example of a speaking object talking in the first person (*in me porto*). A possibility is that the lines were written on the cross. First of all, we have to clarify which cross might actually be talking in these lines. Therefore, to avoid confusion, it is appropriate to make a distinction between the cross itself as a whole (the golden reliquary and the portion of the cross considered as one object), the cross-shaped golden reliquary and the actual relic of the True Cross. Here it might be the cross as a reliquary talking, claiming it hides inside (*in me porto*) the relics of the Cross (*crucem*). The lines might have been carved along the borders of the reliquary. What seems to undermine this hypothesis are the dimensions of the Black Rood. According to Aelfred, it was only one palm long, and it seems quite hard to imagine how seven lines could be carved on such a small surface. Yet, there is another possibility. Turgot and the list made by Abbots Adam and Ralph mention that the black rood was kept in a casket and a casket could have still proudly claimed it contained the precious cross: the seven lines could have been carved on it.

It is hard to say whether or not the lines – that in any case we will number from 1 to 7 – belong to the same text. Lines 1–4 focus on the speaking object and the relics, their story and some of the characters involved. Lines 5–7 are more vague and obscure, as we shall see, and still contain a reference to the relics (*reliquias celsas*). The scribe deliberately wrote them down on two different pages, while there might still have been space in the margin of the first page. A possibility is that lines 1–4 and lines 5–7 were written on two different parts of the speaking object.

The lines are hexameters, but some of them are not metrically correct:<sup>19</sup>

Mé rēx   scóttō   rúm     cōn   strūxīt   <b>damilada</b>   nātus	SSSS	
āc <b>Mārgā</b>   <b>rétā</b>   dē   ó     gēm   mīs   ōr   nāvīt   ēt   āuro.	D(S?)DSS	
Īn mē   pōrtō   crū   cēm     quām   rēx   ēd   mūndūs   hā   bēbat,	SDSS	
Quā   pōsī   tā   trē   nūs     mār   tīr   ēt   ě   pīscōpūs   ěxtat.	DSSD	
Vī tē   rēliqūi   ās     cēl   sās   mī   rācūlā   mōnstrant.	SDSS	5
Hīis   sīmūl     ēt   prōpē   rāt   ōr   nātīx   īnsūlā   tōta.	DDSS	
Āgnūs   īn   ētēr   nā     āu   la   illīs   prēmīā   prēbet.	DSSS	

Line 1 is a hypermeter. The first four feet are correct, the odd *damilada* is probably the word with an extra syllable, as discussed below. In line 2, the first *a* of

me porto crucem quam rex Edmundus habebat / Quas posita trenus martir et episcopus extat” (50v). This is followed by: “Vite reliquias celsas miracula monstrant / Hiis habens simul et properet ornatrix insula tota / Agnus in eterna aula illis premia prebet” (51r).<sup>7</sup> One might notice how there are two errors in the transcription: 1) *habens* was added before *simul* in the second line on 51r; 2) in the same line there is *properet* instead of *properat*. The assertion that precedes the lines is also imprecise. As suggested in the main text, the words should be attributed not to a *speaking cross* but either to the reliquary or the casket in which it was kept.

<sup>19</sup> Major difficulties in bold. S = spondee; D = dactyl.

*Margareta* should be considered long, causing an unacceptable sequence --v- at the beginning of the verse. The difficulty can be overcome by exceptionally considering the first *a* of *Margareta* as a short vowel or supposing that the second *a* was not pronounced: *Mārgǣ | rētǣ* would therefore become *Mārg | rētǣ* and we would have the sequence SDSS. In line 7 there must be a hiatus between *eterna* and *aula*.

The contents of the text(s) will be now examined in depth.

*Line 1.* The first line reveals through a circumlocution the identity of the builder of the speaking object: it was made by a king of the Scots, who could have been more precisely identified if the text was not, as it probably is, corrupted. In fact, the name of the ruler is not explicitly mentioned. Was he Malcom III, Margaret's husband? We only know that he was *damilada natus*. Apparently, the name of the king can be known by recognizing his birthplace: *Damilada* is supposedly a toponym. Nevertheless, it is not recorded by any other source. It might recall the name of the ancient Scottish kingdom of Dál Riata, but it seems unlikely that someone would mention it in the eleventh century. Another possibility is that *Damilada* is a sort of patronymic with a link to a name like Domnall<sup>20</sup>. The Latin for Domnall is *Doniualdus* and *Damilada* could be a corruption going back to our scribe or to his source, if he did not have the chance to directly see the reliquary: he could either be writing after seeing the reliquary or copying from another source or even writing while someone else was dictating and maybe did not pronounce correctly (or misread) the name. In that case the Scottish king would be a descendant of a Domnall (Donald II?), but also other names could hide behind *damilada*: for example, Duncan, father of Malcom III. Furthermore, if the fifth foot was occupied only by a trisyllabic word, that could only be a name of the third declension in the ablative case (a genitive or ablative of the first and second declension and a genitive of the third would have an – unacceptable – third long syllable). In the end, it is hard to come to a definitive conclusion without further evidence. Surely *damilada* is a corrupted word, as it makes the first line hypermetric, and given the impossibility to amend the text, it will be prudent to add the *cruces desperationis* to this line. There is the possibility that even the word *natus* could be involved in the corruption and the real name of the king could be actually hidden behind the last two words of the line (*damilada + natus*).

The Scottish king *construxit*, 'made', the object. If it is the reliquary speaking, the witness is not consistent with the tradition of Margaret bringing it to Scotland, or we should suppose that Margaret just brought the portion of the

<sup>20</sup> For this hypothesis on the name *Damilada* I am largely indebted to Alex Woolf and Dauvit Broun.

True Cross and then it was kept in a reliquary made in Scotland. Aelred, once again, is not completely clear when he writes *hanc ... allatam* and so on, but supposedly he is referring to the reliquary and its contents. If instead the lines were carved on the casket, we have to imagine that the precious cross brought by the Anglo-Saxon princess was kept in a casket made by a Scottish king: in all likelihood, Margaret's husband, Malcom III.

*Line 2.* The meaning of the line is quite clear: 'And Margaret adorned me with gold and precious stones in honour of God'. *Deo* here is a *dativus commodi*, whereas *gemmis* and *auro* are ablatives of instrument. Gold was not surprisingly already mentioned by Aelred, whereas the precious stones appear here for the first time.<sup>21</sup> The magnificent object is the result of the pious generosity of the king and the queen.

*Line 3.* Here we find the most intriguing detail. 'I carry inside me the cross that King Edmund used to have.' The relic of the True Cross belonged to an Edmund, who is otherwise not identified. There are three possible rulers that could be identified with *rex Edmundus*. One is St Edmund, king of East Anglia from 840 to 869, when he was killed by Danish invaders. The second one is Edmund I, king of England from 939 to 946. The third one is Edmund Ironside, St Margaret's grandfather, who ruled for a few months in 1016. As far as I know, no source mentions any piece of the True Cross belonging either to St Edmund or Edmund I. Instead there is a possible, even if remote, link between King Edmund Ironside and one of the most prestigious relics of the Anglo-Saxon age. In the will of Æthelstan Ætheling (d. 1014) is mentioned a donation to be paid to the 'Holy Cross and St Edward' of Shaftesbury abbey by his brother, Edmund Ironside.<sup>22</sup> Shaftesbury abbey, in Dorset, was founded in 888 by Alfred the Great and always kept a strong bond with the royal house: the first abbess was Æthelgifu, Alfred's daughter; King Edmund I's wife, Ælfgifu (d. 944), was buried there and venerated as a saint; in 981 the remains of St Edward, king and martyr, were translated to the abbey from Wareham. Even though the will of Æthelstan Ætheling is the only document that mentions a 'Holy Cross' of Shaftesbury,<sup>23</sup> it might witness the presence of a relic of the Cross at Shaftesbury, considered in the document as important as the royal saint buried there. It is of course possible that this 'holy cross' was simply an important cross kept in the abbey and not a relic, but the first

<sup>21</sup> However, both Turgot's *Vita* and the Dunfermline *Vita* mention crosses that Margaret had decorated with gold, silver and precious stones. See Keen, *Saint Margaret, Queen of the Scots*, pp. 179–80.

<sup>22</sup> See *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, ed. D. Whitelock (Cambridge, 1930), pp. 169–70.

<sup>23</sup> See *Charters of Shaftesbury Abbey*, ed. S. E. Kelly, AS Charters 5 (Oxford, 1995), p. xv, n. 11.



hypothesis makes sense if we consider that the founder of the abbey, Alfred, actually possessed a very famous relic of the True Cross.<sup>24</sup> Alfred's biographer, Asser, records:

Eodem anno beatae memoriae Marinus papa universitatis viam migravit. Qui Scholam Saxonum in Roma morantium, pro amore et deprecatione Ælfredi, Angulsaxonum regis, ab omni tributo et telonio benigne liberavit. Qui etiam multa dona praedicto regi illa vice transmisit: inter quae dedit etiam non parvam illius sanctissimae ac venerabilissimae crucis partem, in qua Dominus noster Iesus Christus pro universali hominum salute pendit.<sup>25</sup>

If there was a 'holy cross' in Shaftesbury it might well have been a donation of the founder, who could have entrusted the nunnery with at least part of the *non parvam ... crucis partem* sent by Marinus.<sup>26</sup>

Did Edmund Ironside come into possession of the relic or of a portion of it? Margaret might have directly inherited and kept the relic that belonged to her grandfather, a sacred object that could also have the value of symbolic bond to the Anglo-Saxon lineage; but the relic might have come into Margaret's possession in an alternative way. A variant version of Turgot's *Vita*, surviving in a fifteenth-century manuscript compiled at Dunfermline Abbey<sup>27</sup> and probably completed by 1285,<sup>28</sup> states that Margaret came to Scotland 'multis abundans diviciis quas patri suo edwardo tanquam heredi suo sanctus edwardus rex anglie delegaverat .... Attulit etiam plurimas sanctorum reliquias omni auro et lapide preciosiores, inter quas fuit illa sancta crux quam nigram crucem nominant, omni genti scotorum non minus terribilem quam

<sup>24</sup> See *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, ed. D. Whitelock, p. 170: 'Possibly Shaftesbury received a portion of the wood of the True Cross sent to Alfred (Asser, 71), or it may have possessed a famous crucifix like the Holy Cross of Waltham.'

<sup>25</sup> *Vita Ælfredi*, 71. Asser's *Life of King Alfred, together with the Annals of Saint Neots*, ed. W. H. Stevenson (Oxford, 1904), pp. 53-4. 'In the same year Pope Marinus of blessed memory went the way of all flesh. He had generously released the Saxon quarter in Rome from all tribute and tax, as a result of the friendship and entreaties of Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons. On that occasion the pope also sent many gifts to King Alfred, among which he gave not a small piece of that most holy and venerable Cross, on which our Lord Jesus Christ hung for the salvation of all mankind'. See S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's 'Life of King Alfred' and other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth, 1983), p. 88.

<sup>26</sup> See *ibid.* p. 254, n. 137: 'Alfred may have entrusted his piece to his foundation at Shaftesbury'. On Marinus' gift and its uses, see B. Harbert, 'King Alfred's Æstel', *ASE* 3 (1974), 103-10. In Watson, 'The Black Rood of Scotland', p. 29, the possible connection between the two relics was already proposed. We can exclude a connection between our relic and the *crux nigra* of Abingdon, which is represented as a 'cruciform disc-headed pin' and was allegedly 'made in large part from nails of the Lord', see *Historia Ecclesie Abbdendonensis: the History of the Church of Abingdon*, ed. and trans. J. Hudson, 2 vols. (Oxford, 2002-7) 1, clxx and 242-3.

<sup>27</sup> Madrid, Biblioteca Real II 2097, 1v-17v.

<sup>28</sup> Keen, *Saint Margaret, Queen of the Scots*, p. 6.

amabilem pro sanctitatis sue reverencia.<sup>29</sup> This information is compatible with that found in line 3 as the Black Rood may well have been among the rich gifts made by King Edward the Confessor<sup>30</sup> – Edmund Ironside’s halfbrother – to Edward the Exile, Margaret’s father, as an inheritance of the Wessex dynasty, and treated as an inheritance by Margaret, who left it to her sons. Still, it was important to mention in the lines that the cross once belonged to King Edmund. But if the Black Rood is somehow related to the famous relic donated by Pope Marinus, then it is surprising to find no mention of King Alfred in our hexameters.

*Line 4.* The meaning of this line is far from clear and this leads to the conclusion that the line is corrupted. *Qua posita* is an ablative absolute and the Latin verb *ponere* can mean ‘to place’ or ‘put’, so it can be translated as ‘after the relic was put ...’, probably a reference to the placing of the relic into the reliquary or the casket. The main meaning of the verb *extare* is either ‘to stand out’ or ‘to be conspicuous, evident’: neither meaning seem to particularly fit these lines and the second one would require also a subordinate sentence – explaining what is evident – that is missing. Furthermore, no martyr and bishop named *Trenus* is known. It must be noted that in this line the word *martir* has an unusual prosody: the *i* must be considered long as it is the first vowel of the fourth foot, but it is normally short. It is not a major error, but it just seems a further evidence of the corruption.

It is impossible to restore the original line without any other witness, but at least some hypothesis can be suggested. Each of the first three lines contains a proper name of a personality connected with the reliquary: first the (not so) mysterious Scottish king who built the speaking object, then Queen Margaret, who decorated it, finally King Edmund, who previously possessed the portion of True Cross then kept inside the Black Rood. The fourth line probably contained the name of another person. If not the otherwise unknown *Trenus*, who could this person be? If our reliquary contained part or the entire fragment of the *vera crux* owned by the Anglo-Saxon royal house, the other personalities connected with it could be King Alfred and Pope Marinus. One might be tempted to suppose that their names once appeared in the fourth

<sup>29</sup> ‘abounding in many riches which the holy Edward, king of England had given to her father Edward as his heir ... She also took many relics of the saints, more precious than any gold or jewel, among which was the cross which they call the Black Cross, not less feared than loved by all the people of the Scots for reverence of its holiness’ (*ibid.* pp. 172–3). The same text with minor changes appears also in *Joannis de Fordun Chronica gentis Scotorum*, ed. W. F. Skene (Edinburgh, 1871), p. 213. The last words clearly go back to Aelred’s description.

<sup>30</sup> To Edward the Confessor is also attributed a donation of a fragment of the Cross to Westminster. See e. g. Keene, *Saint Margaret, Queen of the Scots*, p. 32.

line: maybe the line was not readable any more and the scribe (or his oral or written source, if he could not see the reliquary) wrote what he saw just trying to fill the gaps and thus originating our problematic line. There are many possibilities. For example, behind *-a trenus martir et episcopus* could be *alfredo marinus episcopus*: the prosody would now work perfectly, but how could these names fit the rest of the sentence? Further changes are required, but we would need some other evidence. Furthermore, if the speaking object is the reliquary and the verb *ponere* refers to the placement of the relic in the reliquary, then Alfred and Marinus are not the names behind the corruption, as the reliquary – at least according to lines 1 and 2 – probably did not exist before the eleventh century. The verb might refer instead to the deposition in the casket. The line surely refers to a bishop who played a role in the placement of the relic, but as it is impossible to identify him, it would be more prudent to use again the *crucis desperationis*.

The last three lines have a different tone: they do not give any specific information about the reliquary or the relic and they do not mention any personality, but, instead, they stress the miraculous value of the relics, the veneration they inspire and express a final wish with a biblical image.

*Line 5.* The meaning seems clear: 'The miracles prove that the relics are extraordinary'. Only the first word, *vite*, is more problematic. It goes with *miracula* – the expression 'the relics of the life' would sound a little clumsy – and it is a genitive, but whose *vita* is it? A reference to the miracles performed by Jesus during his life would sound odd (and after all, the sanctity of the relics of the True Cross does not require Jesus' miracles to be proved!). The other possibility is that *vite ... miracula* refers to the miracles performed by one of the personalities mentioned above while he or she was still alive. We can exclude the Scottish king and the King Edmund on these grounds and consider only Margaret and the *episcopus*. The first hypothesis implies that the inscription was written after the death of the queen, but the sentence would still appear slightly odd as it implies that the miracles performed by Margaret (thanks to the relics?) prove that the relics are extraordinary. We cannot exclude another corruption. It is worth mentioning that even Aelred stressed the importance of the miraculous power of the relics.

*Line 6.* The word *ornatrix*, referred to *insula*, derives from the verb *ornare*, which has two main different meanings: 'to prepare, equip, adorn' and 'to honour'. Here *ornatrix* has to be understood according to the second meaning of *ornare*: it underlines the devotion of the island of Britain to the relics. The adjective *tota*, apparently unimportant, is meaningful and could reveal a political message (and not a secondary one): the relics are revered not just by the Scots but by the

whole island. Britain is unified by the devotion for the Black Rood. The concept is extremely significant and surely reflects, and in a way summarizes, the story of the reliquary as we now understand it thanks to this find. In fact, in the previous lines we learned that both Scottish and English kings had a role in the conservation of the relics. The Black Rood, so far remembered as the most important medieval Scottish reliquary, is here presented as a precious and sacred object uniting two nations. This political message was surely dear to St Margaret, who came to Scotland only after trying in vain to go back to the kingdom once ruled by her family and who named four of her sons after the most important Anglo-Saxon kings: Edward, Edmund, Ethelred, Edgar; it was surely dear to Malcom as well, the Scottish king who thought that, thanks to his marriage, he could interfere with the conflicts taking place in Northern England.

Britain *properat*, ‘hasten’ to honour the relics. *Hiis simul et*, ‘and together with them’: *hiis* must refer to the personalities previously mentioned, rather than to the miracles; the personal devotion of these illustrious characters is now widespread and is now shared by the inhabitants of the whole island.

*Line 7.* The reward for the worshippers of the reliquary, eternal beatitude, is illustrated by an eschatological image: the Apocalyptic Lamb (*Apo.* 5, 6 ff.) will reward them all in the eternal hall. The glory of Heaven surely confers a solemn tone on the line, concluding the short poem in a triumphal way.

Can we consider this to be a unique poem? To the different position of the lines in the manuscript corresponds also a difference in terms of contents and tone: as already discussed, the first four lines contain information about the story of the speaking object and the cross, and name personalities involved in this story, whereas the last three lines celebrate the power of the relics and the glory awaiting their worshipers. We cannot discount the possibility that lines 1–4 and lines 5–7 appeared on two different parts of the speaking object, because they conveyed different kinds of information and then were copied separately on the manuscript.

Therefore, we will call the two parts *A* and *B* in this final version of the edition:

A

Me rex Scottorum construxit †Damilada† natus  
ac Margareta Deo gemmis ornavit et auro.  
In me porto crucem quam rex Edmundus habebat,  
Qua posita †Trenus martir et† episcopus extat.

B

Vite reliquias celsas miracula monstrant.  
Hiis simul et properat ornatrix insula tota.  
Agnus in eterna aula illis premia prebet

5

CONCLUSION

The contents of the text, and the fact that it is copied below the passage of the *Genealogia*, reveal that the lines can only be related to the Black Rood of Scotland. But can we discount the possibility that they are the work of a forger or the invention of a playful scribe? The answer must be surely affirmative. A forger wants to sound authentic. He might even add a couple of errors on purpose to reach his aim. However, the problems and the evident errors in these lines are so many and so important that they confirm, not so paradoxically, the authenticity of the text.

Also, it is plausible that a scribe working at Rievaulx could hear or read about the Black Rood of Scotland. A connection between Edinburgh and Rievaulx is known: Aelred spent ten years in Scotland at the court of Margaret's son, King David I, and might well have seen the reliquary. Now, if Aelred knew these lines, he must have decided that they were not important enough to deserve a mention in his description of the reliquary: then why did he reveal them to a scribe (or to other monks)? Probably he was not the direct source of the scribe, a conclusion that in any case does not undermine the authenticity of the text.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, the poetic text still has an undeniable worth. First of all, it widens our knowledge of the story of the Black Rood. According to the lines, the relic and its container were the perfect (and sacred) symbol of the union between Malcom III and Margaret, sealing together the Scottish and the old West Saxon royal house, now deprived of its kingdom by the Normans. This message could have been particularly pleasing both for Malcom and Margaret.

The relic once belonged to King Edmund, probably Edmund Ironside, and therefore we have to suppose that at some point it was inherited by Margaret, Edmund's granddaughter, who, in turn, left it as an inheritance to her sons. She might have already had it in Hungary or received it after she returned to England in 1057, when her family was called back by King Edward the Confessor. She then brought it to Scotland when she married Malcolm III. Other people are involved in the story of the Black Rood, but the probable corruption of the lines does not allow their identification.

The cross once owned by King Edmund may be somehow related to the portion of the True Cross that pope Marinus donated to King Alfred. The house of Wessex, like royal houses on the Continent, made use of the prestige derived from the possession and the donation of sacred relics. Apart from King Alfred, who donated smaller portions of his precious relic to his bishops,<sup>32</sup> it

<sup>31</sup> Still, there is the possibility that part of Aelred's information on St Margaret is now lost. See *Symeonis Dunelmensis Opera et Collectanea*, ed. J. Hodgson Hinde, pp. 256–7, n. x.

<sup>32</sup> See Harbert, 'King Alfred's æstel', p. 108.

is worth mentioning the case of King Athelstan, who donated relics of the cross to Malmesbury and Exeter and received from the Duke of the Franks Hugh the Great, who wanted to marry Athelstan's fourth sister, the sword of Constantine containing one of the nails of the True Cross, the spear of Longinus and that of St Maurice, both once owned by Charlemagne, then a portion of the Cross *crystallo inclusam* and part of the crown of thorns: William of Malmesbury, who witnesses this list, concludes by saying that 'ceteris [donis] quidem successores reges dotaui'.<sup>33</sup> Relics could seal unions; their sacredness was able to bond together families, dynasties and even nations.

This is exactly what our lines – written on the reliquary or more probably on the casket in which the cross was kept – underline, suggesting a very powerful message: the whole island is united by devotion towards the relics. The story told by these lines and between the lines is certainly reliable, even though there are many gaps that still need to be filled: thanks to the union of Margaret and Malcolm a new day has dawned for Britain, with the blessing of Heaven through the miraculous relics of the Cross of the Saviour. Ironically, the story had a very different ending. Instead of being considered a sacred gift for the whole island, the Black Rood soon became the Black Rood of Scotland (*crux Scotie nigra*), a national symbol. So it appeared to the English king Edward I, when he moved into Scotland and wanted to discourage the Scots by depriving them of their royal and religious symbols. And even later, when it was appreciated only for its devotional value, it was probably destroyed as a symbol of 'idolatry' in the darkest days of the reign of Henry VIII.

<sup>33</sup> 'with the rest of the gifts he endowed his successors on the throne', see *William of Malmesbury: Gesta regum Anglorum* / 'The History of the English Kings' I, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors with R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom (Oxford 1998), pp. 220–1. See also L. H. Loomis, 'The Holy Relics of Charlemagne and King Athelstan: the Lances of Longinus and St Mauricius', *Speculum* 25 (Oct. 1950), 437–56.