

'Danse Macabre' Around the Tomb and Bones of Margaret of York.

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Introduction¹

Over 500 years ago on 23 November 1503, at Malines, in present day Belgium, died Margaret of York,² sister to Edward IV and Richard III of England and third and last wife of Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, whom she survived by a quarter of a century.³ In her will she had asked to be buried in the church of the Franciscan or Grey Friars at Malines,⁴ which is situated opposite the west entrance of the present St Rombout's Cathedral.

It is certain that her body was actually buried in the Franciscan church, of which the main building survives today as part of the Malines Cultural Centre. Her heart was interred at the Carthusian house of Herne, about twenty-five

¹ This is an extended version of a paper given at the 44th conference of the *Centre européen d'études bourguignonnes (XIV^e-XV^e s.)*, held at Malines 25-27 September 2003 on the theme of 'Marguerite d'York et son temps'. The French text will appear in the transactions of the conference, with the title "Danse macabre" autour du squelette de Marguerite d'York. Repose-t-il toujours à Malines?. I would like to thank everybody who provided me with information (in alphabetical order): Wim Ceuppens, Henri Installé, Marcel Kocken, Norbert Moermans, François Van der Jeught and Livia Visser-Fuchs (who also translated my text into English and slightly edited the notes for English readers).

² Jean Molinet, *Chroniques*, ed. G. Doutrepoint and O. Jodogne, Brussels 1935-1937, vol. 2, p. 526.

³ On Margaret: L. Galesloot, 'Marguerite d'York, duchesse douairière de Bourgogne, 1468-1503', *Annales de la Société d'Émulation de Bruges*, 4th s., vol. 30 (1879), pp. 187-334; L. Hommel, *Marguerite d'York ou la Duchesse Junon*, [Paris] 1959; C. Weightman, *Margaret of York, Duchess of Burgundy, 1466-1503*, Stroud/New York 1993; P. Robins, 'Le mariage de Marguerite d'York et de Charles le Téméraire en 1468', *Handelingen van de Koninklijke Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst van Mechelen (HKKOLKM)*, vol. 95 (1992), pp. 75-96; the same, 'Le veuvage et le douaire de Marguerite d'York', *HKKOLKM*, vol. 97 (1993), pp. 123-79, and vol. 105 (2001), pp. 35-86; H. Schnitker, 'Margaretha van York en Cecily Neville: politiek en heiligenverering in de Nederlanden en East Anglia', *HKKOLKM*, vol. 105 (2001), pp. 81-96; the same, "'Een bibliotheek ontsloten". Nieuw licht op de boekerij van Margareta van York', *HKKOLKM*, vol. 106 (2002), pp. 265-88. See also A. Wroe, *Perkin. A Story of Deception*, Londen 2003.

⁴ Lille, Archives Départementales du Nord, Chambre des Comptes, B.458, no. 17919; SAM (= Stadsarchief Mechelen, Malines Town Archives), Chronologische Aenwyser, vol. 5, f. 44.

kilometres south-east of Brussels, and her intestines at the Carthusian house of Scheut, near Brussels.⁵

Of Margaret's funeral monument not a trace remains, but it can be deduced from a number of written sources where – approximately -- she was buried, and what her monument – more or less – looked like. The oldest and probably best source is a manuscript containing numerous descriptions of epitaphs from mainly Brabantine churches, produced between 1550 and 1560 and now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris.⁶ Folio 146 reads:

**MALLINES
AUX CORDELLIERS.**

Sur l'huis du coeur en une arcure est haulte et puissante dame Madame marguerit de Iorck seur de Edouerd ... du nom Roy dangleterre femme iii^e de Charles duc de bourgo[n]gne, laquelle est a genoulx presentee par sainte marguerite. Et de l'autre coste dud[it] huys icelle dame couche morte sur une natte enveloppee dung suaire, une couronne sur son chief avecq trois cordelliers l'administrans. Le tout faict dallebastre, et y a ung ange tenans ses armes en lozenge. Lepitaphe en lame de cuyvre est tel:

(Over the doorway to the choir within an arch is the high and mighty lady Lady Margaret of York, sister to Edward [...] of that name, third wife of Charles, Duke of Burgundy, and she is on her knees, being presented by St Margaret. And on the other side of the same doorway is the same lady lying dead on a cloth wrapped in a shroud, a crown on her head and attended by three Franciscan friars. The whole is made of alabaster, and there is an angel supporting her coat of arms on a lozenge. The epitaph on a copper plaque says:)

[there follows a drawing of her coat of arms supported by a kneeling angel]

Sub limine ostii huius chori Illustrissima et Excellentissima D[omi]na Margareta de Anglia ducissa burgundie pia humilitate corpus suum condi mandavit Serenissimorum principum Edouardi et Ricardi Regum Anglie soror, uxor quonda[m] inclyte memorie Caroli ducis burgundie et Brabantie, etc. comitis Flandrie Arthesie etc. Domini mechlinie etc. Juris, Religionis, Reformationis, pietatis mire faultrix]. Obiit] Mechlinie oppido

⁵ Hommel, *Marguerite*, p. 337.

⁶ Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, fr. 5234, *Recueil d'épitaphes et d'armoiries copiées dans diverses églises de Brabant et pays circonvoisins*, f. 146, illustrated (with incorrect ms. reference) in J.J. Tricot-Royer, 'À la recherche de Marguerite d'York', in E. Ashworth-Underwood, ed., *Science, Medecine and History. Essays in honour of Charles Singer*, 2 vols, Oxford 1953, vol. 1, pl. VII between pp. 220-21. The ms. originates from the Fonds Le Tellier-Louvois (no. 139), Hommel, *Marguerite*, p. 339, n. 2. I am grateful to Mrs Marie-Laure Prévost, *Conservateur général du Département des Manuscrits de la BNF*, who sent me a copy from the catalogue of the *Ancien Fond*, p. 631, indicating it was formerly 9815(5).

suo dotalitio novembris die vicesima tertia anno domini millesimo quingentesimo tertio. Orate pro ea.⁷

(Underneath the threshold of the doorway of this choir the most illustrious and excellent lady Margaret of England, Duchess of Burgundy, with devout humility ordered her body to be enclosed. She was sister to the most serene princes Edward and Richard, Kings of England, late wife to Charles, Duke of Burgundy and Brabant, etc, Count of Flanders, Artois, etc., Lord of Malines, etc., of famous memory; she served justice, the faith, and reform and was wonderfully pious. [She died] at Malines her dower town on the twenty-third day of November in the year of Our Lord 1503. Pray for her.)

It appears that she was buried *sub limine ostii huius chori*, which is usually taken to mean beneath the threshold of the entrance to the choir. The description indicates that her monument must have consisted of two parts, erected in an arch and consisting of two groups of alabaster statues: on one side the image of the kneeling princess with her patron saint St Margaret, and on the other her lifeless body in a shroud, crowned and attended by three friars.⁸ There was also the angel supporting the lozenge of her coat of arms, illustrated in the manuscript. Her epitaph had been inscribed on a copper plaque (fig. 1).

Most authors assume that her monument was somehow part of the screen,⁹ on one side the kneeling princess facing the altar, on the other her cadaver tomb visible from the nave. The brass plaque may have been in the floor or on the side of the monument, the angel with her coat of arms further identifying the deceased.

⁷ Compare the transcription of Tricot-Royer, *Recherbe*, p. 221; Hommel, *Marguerite*, pp. 339-40; Galesloot, 'Marguerite', pp. 317-24; [R. Van den Eynde and J.F.G. De Cuyper d'Alsingen], *Provincie, Stad ende District van Mechelen opgebeldert in haere kercken, kloosters, kapellen, gilden (...)*, Brussels 1770, vol. 2, p. 3; J. Schoeffer, *Historische aanteekeningen rakende de kercken, de kloosters, de ambachten en andere stichten der Stad Mechelen*, Malines [c. 1877] (reprinted Algemeen Rijksarchief en Rijksarchief in de Provinciën, Reprints 53, Brussels 1996), vol. 2, pp. 514-15.

⁸ See [Van den Eynde and De Cuyper d'Alsingen], vol. 2, p. 3, which mentions only two clerics: Sts Francis and Bernard, and comp. Schoeffer, *Aanteekeningen*, vol. 2, p. 515, who was forced to use Van den Eynde and De Cuyper d'Alsingen as a source, but complains about its lack of reference; comp. A. Van Puymbrouck, *De Franciscanen te Mechelen 1231-1893*, Ghent [1893], p. 147, and R. De Roo, 'Het graf van Margareta van York', *HKKOLKM*, vol. 60 (1956), p. 107.

⁹ Translator's note: the reader should have in mind a solid and monumental stone screen, like e.g. the one in St George's Chapel, Windsor, not a simple wooden one which one can look through.

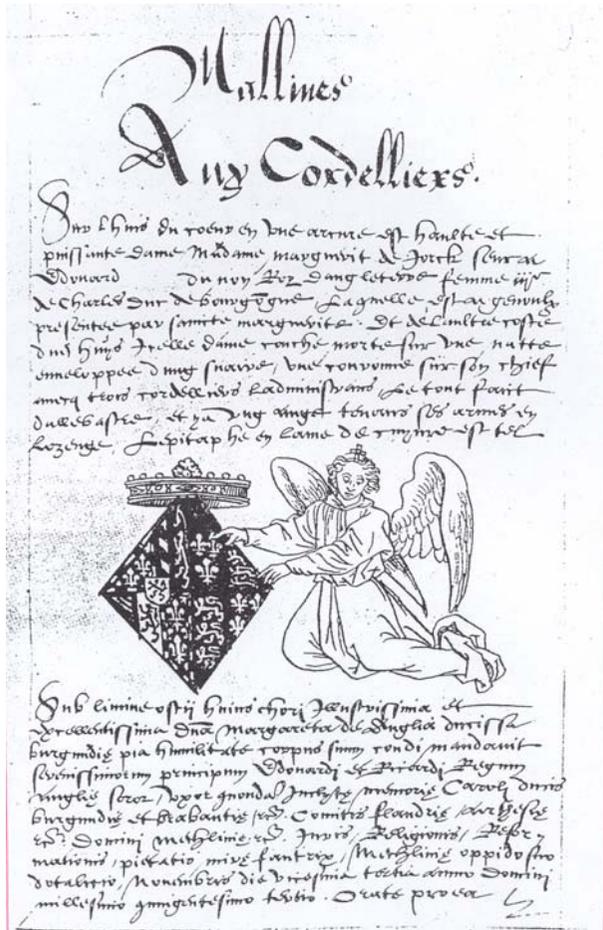


Fig. 1

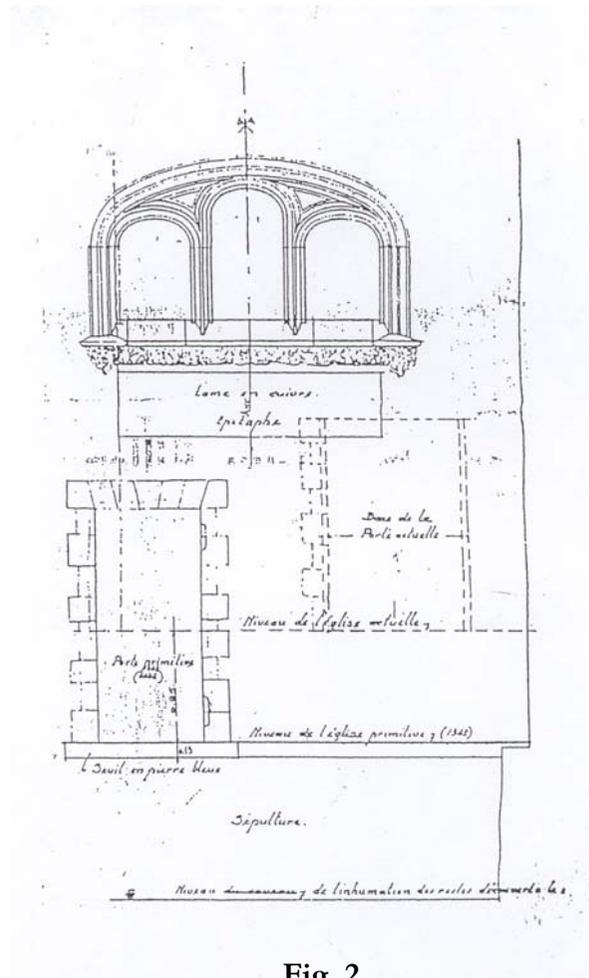


Fig. 2

The description of the monument is detailed and provides factual information about its location and appearance, but even so it is not easy to imagine exactly where it was and what it looked like. To gain absolute certainty comparable funeral monuments would have to be found and these do not exist in the relevant region. I do not know of any comparable double monument in the Low Countries or England which could have inspired a royal princess. What we do find is either the one – a kneeling figure with a patron saint – or the other – an effigy of the deceased in death. When these two elements were combined they were usually placed the one above the other: the deceased, or the deceased couple, lying as in death below, and kneeling, as in life, above.¹⁰ Such monuments were either separate structures within the choir itself or filled the space between two pillars dividing the choir from the choir aisle. In Margaret's case the monument is said to have stood on the screen, as a chronicle of c. 1620 claims.¹¹

There is also disagreement about the exact location of the plaque and even of the grave itself. Some authors take the text literally and situate her grave underneath the threshold of the choir entrance, covered by the brass plaque. It seems more logical, however, to assume that she was buried underneath her monument, and that the plaque was on the monument, probably at its foot, beneath the angel with her coat of arms.

As we shall see, the architect Max Winders was convinced that the monument had not been erected on the screen between choir and nave, but in the side wall between church and monastery. He even thought that it had the shape of a triptych and had been placed over the door in the wall which, on the south side, divided the church from the monastery. The brass plaque, according to this hypothesis, was set below the monument and over the doorway.¹² Such a double monument – albeit not in the shape of a triptych, but as a two-piece monument along both sides of the wall – is not without precedent,¹³ but is rejected in this instance by most commentators on the grounds that the other sources do not corroborate this. It also does not agree with what the author of the 1550-60 manuscript, who was a visitor and a

¹⁰ E.g. the monuments of the French kings Louis XII (†1515), Francis I (†1547) and Henry II (†1559) and their wives in the church of Saint-Denis, see e.g. M. Auzolle, ed., *L'église abbatiale de Saint-Denis*. II. *Les tombeaux royaux*, [Paris 1980], nos 62, 65, 68.

¹¹ The chronicle of the Franciscan Henricus Sedulius (see below n. 16); this chronicle is preserved in the library of San Isidro, Rome; the archives of the Franciscan house of Sint-Truiden have a photocopy, Hommel, *Marguerite*, p. 341, n. 1.

¹² See below n. 37.

¹³ E.g. the alabaster tomb of Queen Elisenda de Montcada (died 1364), 4th wife of James II of Catalonia and Aragon in the convent of Santa Maria de Pedralbes near Barcelona; it is set in the wall dividing choir from cloisters. On the church side her statue is dressed royally, on the other as a nun.

layman, appears to have seen. In 1550-60 the church had a stone screen which one usually entered via a main entrance between nave and choir; the structure was comparable to that of the church of St Gommaire at Lier.¹⁴

It all remains guesswork, because, as said before, the monument has completely disappeared and as far as we know no depiction of it survives.

On 23 August 1566 the Beggars (*Geuzen*) took the town of Malines by surprise. Religious buildings suffered badly, the church of the Grey Friars among them. Statues and funeral monuments were destroyed. A second wave of destruction followed in 1572, the Spanish Fury, and on 9 April 1580 the building, including Margaret's monument, was razed to the ground by the English Fury.¹⁵ Many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century chroniclers report that not only was the monument demolished, the lead coffin in which she was buried was broken up and her bones scattered.¹⁶ Most of the friars fled to Cologne and did not return until many years later, when Spanish rule had been restored. Church and monastery were rebuilt. On 17 October 1610 the foundation stone was laid for a new, enlarged monastic church, but in 1797 the friars were finally ejected from their house by the French revolutionary government and the church became a depot for military supplies.

The Search for Margaret's Bones

At the end of the nineteenth century, while the church was still serving as a depot, the first suggestions to dig up Margaret's bones were voiced. Inspired by the recent disinterment of the remains of Isabel of Habsburg, wife of Christian of Denmark and sister of Charles V, in the church of St Gudule in Brussels in 1884 the Brussels newspaper *La Belgique* expressed the desirability of searching for Margaret of York's bones as well, and rebury them in the grave of her husband, Charles the Bold, in the church of Our Lady at Bruges.¹⁷ On 1 August 1892 a proposal to excavate Margaret's grave was discussed by the town council of Malines.¹⁸ Permission from the ministry of war was

¹⁴ See n. 40 below.

¹⁵ Hommel, *Marguerite*, p. 338; De Roo, 'Graf', p. 106.

¹⁶ See the chronicle of Henricus Sedulius, c. 1620: (...) *sed omnes a Geuziis proiectae et conculcatae (...) mortua tumulata fuit sub oxali (ut vocant) ad introitum chori in plumbea capsula, quam Geuzii, refodientes more suo, reliquias abiecerunt* (cited De Roo, *Graf*, p. 107, who, in n. 5, p. 108, refers to a report by the Chapter General of the Friars Minor of 1647, in which a similar statement is made: *sepultaque fuit ad introitum chori sub oxali, ut vocant, in plumbea capsula; sed reliquias effoderunt et dispersarunt Geuzii*. He also cites other 17th- and 18th-c. chroniclers and authors, e.g. A. Sanderus, *Chronographia sacra Brabantiae*, vol. 3, The Hague 1727, p. 172, and J. Le Roy, *Le Grand Théâtre sacré du Duché de Brabant*, vol. 1, The Hague 1734, pp. 66, 68.

¹⁷ Hommel, *Marguerite*, p. 339.

¹⁸ The proposal was put forward by alderman Kempeneer, G. Van Doorslaer, 'De Minderbroeders te Mechelen', *Mechlinia*, vol. 10 (1932), p. 20, n. 1.

obtained, but apparently no actual work was undertaken.¹⁹ In 1932 the Malines doctor Georges Van Doorslaer²⁰ again expressed the wish that excavations be carried out shortly.²¹ In 1934 Dr Jean-Joseph Tricot-Royer²² convinced the minister of the need to dig for Margaret's bones; he had recently and successfully searched for the graves of the dukes of Brabant²³ and claimed to possess important evidence of the probable location of Margaret's grave. His proposal met with resistance in several Malines circles, who did not see the need for such an enterprise.²⁴

In 1936, at last, a special committee was formed by the council to oversee the search for Margaret's bones. Its purpose was to gather all available information and persuade the two rival historical societies of the town to work together.²⁵ In the end the excavations were executed by members of the *Mechelschen Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Geschiedenis en Folklore* alone, under the supervision of Vaast Steurs.²⁶ He had trenches dug from the main altar to the entrance of the church. Foundations of what he took to be the screen were uncovered and near the centre, in front of the entrance to the choir, a double burial chamber was discovered, 2.25 m. long and 1.72 meter wide, covered by an arched vault of which the greater part had collapsed. The walls of the chamber were painted with reddish brown crosses on a white background. The chamber had clearly been disturbed and in the larger of its two sections the remains of three skeletons were found, one of them apparently female. On 20 September 1936 a report was presented to the town council, in which it was stated with certainty that this was the grave they had been looking for,

¹⁹ De Roo, 'Graf', p. 109, with reference to *Bulletin Communal*, 1892, p. 77, and *De Mechelaar*, 7 August 1892.

²⁰ Dr Georges Van Doorslaer (1864-1940), member and past chairman of the *Cercle archéologique, littéraire et artistique de Malines*.

²¹ In his 'Minderbroeders', p. 20, n. 1, in the context of the description of Margaret's monument.

²² This doctor cum dentist (1875-1951) became an important figure in medical historiography, taught at Louvain University and founded the *Société Internationale de l'Histoire de la Médecine (Societas Internationalis Historiae Medicinae)*.

²³ J.J. Tricot-Royer, 'Les anciens ducs de Brabant. Leur mort, leurs sépultures, les exhumations de Louvain', *Aesculape*, vol. 20 (1930), pp. 153-84; the same, 'Les anciens princes de Brabant. Les exhumations d'Afflighem', *Le Progrès Médical, suppl. illustré*, vol. 8 (1931), pp. 1-11; the same, 'La décarnation des cadavres. À propos des exhumations de Louvain et d'Afflighem', *Aesculape*, vol. 21 (1931), pp. 154-58.

²⁴ De Roo, 'Graf', p. 109 and n. 1.

²⁵ On the one hand the *Cercle archéologique, littéraire et artistique de Malines*, founded in 1886, now the *Koninklijke Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst van Mechelen*, and on the other the *Mechelschen Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Geschiedenis en Folklore*, which existed from 1930 to 1950.

²⁶ G.T.E. Steurs (1890-1959), town archivist of Malines 1940-1944.

containing Margaret's bones which happened to have got mixed up with parts of two other skeletons.²⁷ The council trod with care, however, and decided to entrust the examination of the bones to Dr Tricot-Royer. He was formally asked to do so on 10 October 1936 and was to be assisted by Dr Franz-André Sondervorst, his eventual successor,²⁸ and by Dr van Doorslaer. On 31 May 1937 they made their report, which started with some critical comments on the rather nonchalant manner in which the excavations had been conducted: no photographs had been taken of the remains *in situ* and the examiners had, in fact, been lumbered with a pile of bones from which they had had to draw their conclusions. With great trouble they managed to conclude that skeleton A must have belonged to an adult male, 1.64 metre tall, skeleton B to a person of at least fifty years of age and 1.57 metre tall, but whose sex could not be determined, and that skeleton C possibly belonged to a female between fifty and sixty, 1.54 metre tall. Many questions remained, however. It was remarkable, for example, that all the long bones of these three people were longer on the left side, which seemed to point to a family defect.²⁹ Attempts were made to obtain more certain information by asking some English scholars who had recently been examining the supposed skulls of the young sons of Edward IV, Margaret's brother,³⁰ but unfortunately not enough material was available to allow any comparison.³¹ Art historians, moreover, were of the opinion that the burial chamber and the murals predated the sixteenth century, and that the grave was too simple for a person of high status. Perhaps the chamber had to be regarded as an ossuary for inmates of the monastery. '*L'archéologie et l'histoire engagent à de prudentes réserves*', 'Archeology and history warn us to be careful and have reservations', wrote the examiners

²⁷ V. Steurs, 'Het graf van Margareta van York', *Mechelsche Bijdragen*, vol. 3 (1936), pp. 109-17 (with photographs).

²⁸ Professor at Louvain University (1909-1986).

²⁹ Tricot-Royer, 'Recherche', p. 220.

³⁰ P.M. Kendall, *Richard III*, London 1973, Appendix I, *Who murdered the 'Little Princes'?*, pp. 393-418; A.J. Pollard, *Richard III and the Princes of the Tower*, Stroud 1991; L. E. Tanner and W. Wright, 'Recent investigations regarding the fate of the Princes in the Tower', *Archaeologia*, vol. 84 (1934), pp. 1-26; P.W. Hammond and W.J. White, 'The Sons of Edward IV: A re-examination of the evidence on their deaths and on the bones in Westminster Abbey', in P.W. Hammond, ed., *Richard III: Loyalty, Lordship and Law*, 2nd edn, London 2000, pp. 121-70; H. Maurer, 'Bones in the Tower: a discussion of time, place and circumstance', *The Ricardian*, vol. 8 (1988-90), pp. 474-93 en vol. 9 (1991-93), pp. 2-23; and comp. T. Mollesen, 'Anne Mowbray and the Princes in the Tower: a study in identity', *The London Archaeologist*, vol. 5 (1987), pp. 258-62, who is convinced these remains are the princes'. Prof. Charles Singer organised the meeting of the Belgian and English scholars in 1936-37, Tricot-Royer, 'Recherche', pp. 220-21.

³¹ The English scholars did point out the presence of particular type of nasal bone to which they attached importance, *ibid.*, p. 221.

at the end of their report.³² Vaast Steurs tried to counter this criticism on 25 June 1937, but his arguments were unconvincing.

Eventually a new committee was set up, which started work on 15 September 1937.³³ The first thing to be done was to find out what the church had looked like early in the sixteenth century, before it was altered. It appeared that the alterations had been extensive: the floor had been raised by 60 cm. and at the north end the building had been widened, so much so that the columns between the present-day nave and south aisle follow the central axis of the old church. On 16 October 1937 the well preserved skeleton of a woman was found between the foundations of the first two columns. Again it was believed that Margaret's remains had been found,³⁴ but very shortly after another skeleton was unearthed in the same spot, which made it likely that this was the burial place of a married couple.³⁵ Several other graves were found; it was even assumed that the remains of the famous Floris Berthout (died 1331), Lord of Malines, had been discovered, nearer to the altar.

The architect Max Winders came to visit the excavations and became a permanent member of the research committee.³⁶ He put forward the theory that the entrance to the choir had not been in the centre of the screen, right in front of the altar, but in the side wall which divided the choir from the monastery. Interpreting the description in the manuscript in the Bibliothèque nationale in an idiosyncratic way he decided that the monument had been a triptych, set under an arch over the doorway in the southern dividing wall between church and monastery. The brass plaque, he thought, had been below this monument and over the doorway (fig. 2).³⁷ In November he did find the threshold of this door and shortly after, with the help of a dowsing rod, the lower part of another skeleton.³⁸ Further research showed that this was a male skeleton.³⁹ His theory about the entrance to the choir did not agree with the sources or with the description that an ordinary traveller would have given of the situation.⁴⁰ The search was stopped in late 1937,⁴¹ partly at the insistence of

³² De Roo, 'Graf', p. 111; and the same, 'Les restes de Marguerite d'York et de Charles le Téméraire', *Annales de Bourgogne*, vol. 9 (1937), pp. 259-60, who seized the opportunity to express doubts about the authenticity of the remains of Charles the Bold.

³³ De Roo, 'Graf', pp. 111-12.

³⁴ The discovery was announced on the national news, Tricot-Royer, 'Recherche', p. 222.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Maximilien Winders (1882-1982), *Nouvelle Biographie Nationale*, vol. 3, Brussels 1994, pp. 354-59.

³⁷ Comp. above; his reconstruction of the monument was illustrated with an interview he gave in *La Meuse-La Lanterne*, 11 October 1967.

³⁸ This was a partial skeleton, *ibid.*, not a complete one, *pace* De Roo, 'Graf', p. 113.

³⁹ Tricot-Royer, 'Recherche', p. 223.

⁴⁰ The idea that the screen was small and made of wood is contradicted by the accounts of 1536 concerning the screen in the church of St Gommaire at Lier: *Item alle de welfselen van den*

the military authorities, who demanded the return of their depot. The town council considered the investigation unsuccessful but closed and the controversial remains were deposited in the town archives. The whole affair had only led to frustration and confusion. Dr Tricot-Royer was increasingly convinced that grave and monument had disappeared completely during the sixteenth-century destruction, as the chronicle of Sedulius indicated.⁴² Both Steurs and Winders,⁴³ however, still believed that they had found Margaret's grave and remains, and opinion in historical circles of Malines was divided between believers and non-believers. During the German occupation Steurs, town archivist since 1940, went as far as removing the remains from the archives and burying them, on 20 October 1943, in the garden of his house, Astridlaan 41, Malines. There they were found by accident by the new owner of the house, mr Ernest Doms, in 1953,⁴⁴ lying in a wooden container, within a larger zinc chest of fifty by thirty-eight cm. The zinc chest held three thigh bones, the wooden container the remains of a skeleton. According to a note

docksale zal men moeten maken gheleuck die weljselen te Mechelen te Minderbroeren boven die choerdoere gemaectet zyn, the vaults/arches of the screen are to be made the same as those at the Grey Friars church at Malines, J. Steppe, 'Het koordoksaal in de Nederlanden', *Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, Klasse der Schone Kunsten*, vol. 7, Brussels 1952, p. 94, n. 60, and Document II sub art. VII p. 402. This means that the traveller who was the source for the description in the 1555-1560 ms. saw a screen that had inspired the one at Lier, De Roo, 'Graaf', p. 113. The screen at Lier, made 1536-1538 by the Malines stone masons Frans Mijnsheeren and Jan Wisschavens, survives, *ibid.*, pp. 100-04, and gives some idea of what the one at Malines looked like. Its entrance is in the centre, opposite the main altar; illustrated Steppe, 'Koordoksaal', pls 26-28; F. Moens, *De gotische doksalen in België*, Antwerp 1950, pls 20-22; S. Leurs, *Lier*, Antwerp 1935, pls X-XIII; H. Leemans, *De Sint-Gummaruskerk te Lier*, Inventaris van het Kunstpatrimonium van de Provincie Antwerpen 1, Antwerp-Utrecht 1972, pp. 149-51, pls 141-43.

⁴¹ Winders' excavations lasted from 16 Oct. to 20 Nov. 1937, *Nouvelle Biographie Nationale*, p. 356; S. van Ruyssevelt, 'Gegevens over kerk en klooster van Mechelen', *Franciscana*, 1968, nos 1-2, pp. 51-54.

⁴² Tricot-Royer, 'Recherche', p. 223.

⁴³ As is clear from the interview he gave, printed in *La Meuse-La Lanterne*. 11 Oct. 1967 – republished and re-edited in *De Standaard*, 13 Oct. 1967, p. 4, entitled 'De vondst in de tuin', 'The discovery in the garden', and in the letter he sent to the minister of Justice in 1968, see below.

⁴⁴ Compare the article published in *La Meuse-La Lanterne*, 6 Oct. 1967, entitled 'M. Ernest Doms (71) affirme à nouveau avoir trouvé, en 1953, les ossements de Marguerite d'York (veuve de Charles le Téméraire) qui avaient été enterrés dans son jardin, à Malines'. At that point the container was still in his possession. See also an article in *De Standaard*, 7-8 Oct. 1967, p. 12, entitled 'Bezit Mechelen stoffelijk overschot van Margaretha van York? Engelse prinses leefde er gedurende 26 jaren'; a photograph of the container accompanied the article.

that Steurs had buried with them these were the remains that he and Winders had discovered in the church of the Grey Friars in November 1937.⁴⁵

After the war the church and the former monastery became the property of the town. Extensive rebuilding took place and they became the home of the new Academy of Arts. By accident, on 3 February 1955, some workmen while digging in the choir came across a lead coffin with the remnants of a skeleton. The coffin lay more or less in the centre of the choir and had been put straight into the ground; there was no burial chamber. Further research showed that the coffin, which had been accidentally damaged by the workmen, also bore signs of earlier damage; it appeared to have been opened by force and a large part of the skeleton was missing. The remains were carefully examined in the department of anthropology of the *Koninklijke Instituut voor Natuurwetenschappen van België – Institut royal des Sciences naturelles de Belgique* by Prof. François Twiesselmann,⁴⁶ head of the department. According to his report of 30 March 1956 they were the remains of a woman of about fifty years of age, tall, with relatively narrow shoulders, a wide pelvis and slender limbs. The face was long and narrow, the nose thin, the cheekbones not very prominent, the eyesockets large and round, the forehead bulged in the middle but was fairly low; the hair was highly pigmented.⁴⁷

Comparison was made with surviving portraits of Margaret, and it was decided that there were resemblances.⁴⁸ People became more and more convinced that these could indeed be Margaret's bones.⁴⁹ In the end an acceptable theory was constructed which agreed with the available evidence: the princess had been buried in a lead coffin, her monument destroyed, her grave violated and her bones scattered. The friars, on their return, found the damaged coffin and the remnants of its contents and reburied them in a prominent position in the choir.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ This note, signed by Steurs, reads: '*Stoffelijke overschot der prinses Margaretha van York, weduwe van Karel den Stout, hertog van Bourgondië, dochter van Richard, hertog van York, en zuster van Edward IV, koning van Engeland. Geboren in Engeland rond 1450 en overleden te Mechelen in 1503. Begraven in de kerk der Minderbroeders, daarin ontgraven in november 1937 door de zorgen van bounmeester Max Winders en advocaat Vaast Steurs. Begraven in den hof van het huis Koningin Astridlaan 41 op 20 oktober 1943.*', *De Standaard*, 7-8 Oct. 1967, p. 12.

⁴⁶ On him (1910-99) see his obituary in *Bulletin et Mémoires de la Société d'anthropologie de Paris*, vol. 11 (1999), pp. 503-08.

⁴⁷ The report was published in De Roo, 'Graf', pp. 117-19. See also: SAM, Varia, no. 811, dossier 'Campagne 1955/57. Verslagen door R. De Roo & Prof. Twiesselmann'.

⁴⁸ Hommel, *Marguerite*, pp. 343-46.

⁴⁹ De Roo, 'Graf', p. 116; Hommel, *Marguerite*, p. 346. Also M. Kocken, *Gids voor Oud Mechelen*, Antwerp-Haarlem [1981], pp. 94, 105-19.

⁵⁰ Hommel, *Marguerite*, p. 343; De Roo, 'Graf', pp. 114-15; the same, 'Graf van Margareta van York?', *HKKOLKM*, vol. 39 (1955), p. 191.

During *The British Week in Brussels*, 29 September to 7 October 1967, an exhibition about Margaret and her time was held in the *Bank van Brussel- Banque de Bruxelles*,⁵¹ and her supposed bones became again the centre of attention from the press.⁵² On 27 August 1968 Max Winders, at that time chairman of the Royal Committee for Monuments and Areas of Natural Beauty and still entirely convinced that he had found the bones of the princess, sent a letter to the Minister of Justice – who was also in charge of religious services -- asking that the remains be given honourable burial in St Rombout's cathedral. He even added a plan of the cathedral marked with what he considered the best spot. Minister Vranckx passed on the request to the council of Malines in a letter dated 12 September 1968. The letter shows that both the Belgian and the English court had begun to take an interest. The council sent a lengthy reply, also signed by Cardinal Suenens on behalf of the ecclesiastical authorities, on 19 September, in which it accepted the desirability of a solemn reburial in principle, but added that it was by no means certain that the bones which Winders had disinterred in 1937 were actually Margaret's. The council referred to the discovery made in 1955 and the examination that archivist de Roo had undertaken.⁵³ It was proposed, therefore, that both sets of bones should be carefully re-examined by experts in order to come to a final conclusion. St Rombout's cathedral was not thought to be an appropriate site for a reburial, because there were no historic links between the duchess and the cathedral. The former church of the Grey Friars, which was to be turned into a museum, was considered much more suitable. The letter referred to two previous meetings that had taken place to discuss the matter. One, on 24 January 1967, had been held at the house of Winders, on which occasion de Roo, by now keeper at the Royal Museums of History and Art at Brussels, handed over the result of his researches to Winders. Late in 1967 there had been a meeting at the town hall at the request of the then minister of Justice, at which it had been proposed to send samples of both remains to a British institute specialising in microscopic research and have them compared to some Plantagenet bones that were about to be disinterred. The department entrusted with this never actually took any action and in the end the town council itself took the initiative, pressurised by the ministries of the interior and cultural affairs. A letter was written to the British Museum⁵⁴ and former town archivist De Roo⁵⁵ was

⁵¹ A small catalogue was published in Dutch and French: *Margaretha van York en haar tijd / Marguerite d'York et son temps*, ed. M.R. Thielemans, Ph. Roberts-Jones, L.M.J. Delaisse, E. Sabbe and J.P. Asselberghs.

⁵² See e.g. the articles mentioned above in *La Meuse-La Lanterne* and *De Standaard*, above n. 43, which also make a case for an honourable reburial of her bones.

⁵³ De Roo, 'Graf', pp. 105-19.

⁵⁴ I.e. to Mr Oakley, Keeper in charge of Anthropology at the British Museum, letter of 9 Dec. 1968; SAM, Varia, no. 811.

brought in to get in touch with Prof. Twiesselmann, who had examined the discovery in 1955. Through Twiesselmann the *Koninklijk Instituut voor het Kunstpatrimonium – Institut royal pour le Patrimoine artistique* was contacted. In his letter of 9 January 1969 De Roo urged that all remains, those found by Winders as well as those found in 1955, be sent to Prof. Twiesselmann,⁵⁶ who did actually receive four parcels and a file on 26 February 1969. On 5 August 1970 de Roo was informed by Twiesselmann of the results of the tests by the *Koninklijk Instituut voor Natuurwetenschappen – Institut royal des Sciences naturelles*, the *Koninklijk Instituut voor het Kunstpatrimonium – Institut royal pour le Patrimoine artistique* and the British Museum. ‘*Il résulte de ces analyses différentes qu’aucun des ossements ne coïncide à la période durant laquelle a vécu la Princesse*’, ... ‘none of these bones are from the period in which the princess lived’, was Twiesselmann’s conclusion.⁵⁷ The report was presented to the town council by the archivist and the bones returned to Malines, where they were again deposited at the archives. It looks as if none of the discovered remains can be linked to Margaret of York. And her most recent biographer came to the same conclusion.⁵⁸

The End of the Line?

At first sight, yes. However, a thorough examination of the correspondence reveals that virtually all research focussed on the bones found by Winders. In a letter of 31 January 1970 from M.-A. Delsaux of the *Koninklijk Instituut voor Natuurwetenschappen* to the then town archivist, Bafcop, it appears that three series of samples from Winders’ finds had been selected (A, B and C) and taken to the *Koninklijk Instituut voor het Kunstpatrimonium* for dating. In addition a sample, C, was sent on to the British Museum. Carbon dating – the C-14 method -- was used at that time. The British Museum answered on 5 June 1970 that the sample they had received should be dated to *circa* 1245, while Mr Sneyers of the *Koninklijk Instituut voor het Kunstpatrimonium* had already decided, on 3 September 1969, that only B could be dated with some degree of

⁵⁵ René De Roo, town archivist and keeper and head of the Cultural Centre from 1949 to 1963, later keeper at the Royal Museums of History and Art at Brussels, witnessed the whole ‘campaign’ of 1955.

⁵⁶ SAM, Varia, no. 811; in translation the letter reads: “Dear sir, As promised I visited Prof. Twiesselmann. He is prepared to re-examine the remains found by Mr Winders. And those found in 1955. Therefore two parcels need to be delivered at the Institute (*Koninklijk Instituut voor Natuurwetenschappen*, Vauthierstraat te Brussel). 1) skeleton ‘Winders’ (everything that was found and not the selection that he made recently); 2) skeleton ‘1955’. I enclose the correspondence with the British Museum. Prof. Twiesselmann has copies.”

⁵⁷ SAM, Varia, no. 811, file ‘*Stoffelijke overschot van Margareta van York. Campagne 1968/1970*’.

⁵⁸ Weightman, *Margaret*, p. 218.

certainty, that is to 1367, and belonged to a person aged thirty-seven. Sample A, said to be male, could be between 450 and 350 years old at the most, and C was unsuitable for the method used because the sample was too small. C was also said to be too recent, although the British Museum was able to date a sample from the same parcel to the middle of the thirteenth century. Things get even more confused when it appears that the receipt written when the remains were returned to the Malines town archives on 16 September 1970, mentions the return of all human remains that had been handed over for examination – except, of course, the fragments actually used – and they were said to have been taken from the finds of *Winders and Steurs*!⁵⁹ According to a letter from 1977 from town archivist Bafcop to Patricia Robins, who was doing research on Margaret, the remains had even been taken to London at the request of the English royal family.⁶⁰

Now for some facts, some conclusions and a few recommendations.

In the Malines town archives (*Historisch Archief*) four boxes of human remains which have been linked to Margaret of York are kept today. Two are marked ‘Finds of mr Winders’, and two are marked ‘Finds of the town of Malines’.⁶¹ Furthermore the municipal museum ‘Hof van Busleyden’ has the remnants of a lead coffin dug up in 1955.⁶²

What happened to the container that Steurs had filled with (part of?) the finds of the pre-war excavations of 1936-37 and buried in his garden in 1943? Ernest Doms (1896-1986), who found it, as well as his son, Herman Doms (1927-2000), have died. Did the container pass to the town archives and were its contents added to the ‘Finds of the town of Malines’, or were they handed to the English authorities? In the light of Ernest Doms’ making the matter public in 1967 and the correspondence from archivist Bafcop to Mrs Robins it is possible that the container was shipped to England.

Careful examination of the relevant documents at the time when new research was undertaken in 1969-70 shows that the Malines authorities did indeed want to end, once and for all, the controversy that had existed since the 1930s between believers and non-believers. But it appears that the tests had almost wholly, if not wholly, focused on the bones found by Winders in 1937, although the accidental finds of 1955 were much more promising. This is strange, but can be explained by the fact that it was Winders who first mooted the problem to the government, and he was the one who claimed to have found the ‘genuine’ bones of Margaret. As a result the examination concentrated on them and all we have is relative certainty about *his* finds,

⁵⁹ SAM, Varia, no. 811.

⁶⁰ Robins, ‘Veuvage’, (2001), pp. 64-66.

⁶¹ SAM, Varia, nos. 811-12.

⁶² When I visited the museum on 27 September 2003 they were pointed out to me by Marcel Kocken. They were in a small store room near the entrance of the porter’s lodge.

which do *not* belong to the right period. About the 1955 finds we are still in the dark.⁶³

In 1969-70 the carbon dating method was used, which is only relatively accurate and only allows approximate dating of material that is at least 450 years old.⁶⁴ Today science has more accurate ways of dating objects. One only has to remember some of the anthropological and palaeopathological tests that have been done on the physical remains of historic figures in our area, such as Mary, Duchess of Burgundy (died 1482)⁶⁵ and Engelbert I,⁶⁶ Jan IV⁶⁷ and Engelbert II of Nassau (died 1504)⁶⁸ and their wives.⁶⁹ DNA tests are very accurate when sufficient material for comparison is available.⁷⁰ In the case of

⁶³ Robyns, 'Veuvage', p. 66: '*Néanmoins, la controverse reste ouverte à ce sujet.*'

⁶⁴ The method has been perfected, and samples of only a few millimetres are needed, but the margin of error is still sixteen years when dating 15th-c. objects. The older the object the smaller the margin, and *vice versa*, Hammond and White, 'Sons', pp. 165-66.

⁶⁵ P.A. Janssens, 'Antropologisch en paleopathologisch onderzoek van de beend-erresten uit het centrale graf in de Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk te Brugge. De identificatie van de Hertogin Maria van Bourgondië', *Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Geneeskunde van België*, vol. 43 (1981), pp. 213-270; the same 'De identificatie van de Hertogin Maria van Bourgondië. Een antropologisch en paleopathologisch onderzoek', in H. De Witte *et al.*, *Maria van Bourgondië, Brugge. Een archeologisch-historisch onderzoek in de Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekerk*, Bruges 1982, pp. 141-77. see also Joyce M. Melhuish, 'The remains of Mary of Burgundy', *The Ricardian*, vol 8 (1988-90), pp. 210-16.

⁶⁶ On Engelbert I (c. 1370-1442), e.g. P. De Win, 'Nassau, Engelbert (Engelbrecht) (I) van', *Nationaal Biografisch Woordenboek (NBW)*, vol. 15, Brussels 1996, cols. 531-37.

⁶⁷ On Jan IV (1410-1475), e.g. P. De Win, 'Nassau, Jan (Johan) (IV) van', *NBW*, vol. 15, cols. 546-50.

⁶⁸ On Engelbert II, e.g. P. De Win, 'Engelbert (Engelbrecht) II Graaf van Nassau-Dillenburg en Vianden, heer van Breda', *HKKOLKM*, vol. 95 (1991), pp. 85-115; the same, 'Nassau, Engelbert (Engelbrecht) (II)', *NBW*, vol. 15, cols 537-46; the same, 'Engelbert II, comte de Nassau-Dillenburg et de Vianden, seigneur de Breda et de Diest, vicomte héréditaire d'Anvers', R. de Smedt, ed., *Les Chevaliers de l'Ordre de la Toison d'or au XV^e siècle*, Frankfurt am Main, 2nd edn, 2000, pp. 180-83.

⁶⁹ G. Van Den Eynde and F. De Roode, eds, *Het onderzoek van de grafkelder onder het Nassaumonument in de Grote of O.L.V. kerk te Breda*, Breda, 1996; G.J.R. Maat, G. Van Den Eynde and R.W. Mastwijk, 'De eerste Nassaus in Nederland: identificatie van en paleopathologische bevindingen bij de voorouders van Willem van Oranje, begraven in de Grote of Onze Lieve Vrouwe Kerk te Breda', *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde*, vol. 141 (1997), pp. 2501-13.

⁷⁰ The reader is reminded of the 1998-2000 investigation into the fate of Louis XVII. DNA was taken on the one hand from the heart of the young man, who died in prison a victim of the French Revolution, and which was later interred, as Louis XVII's, in the abbey church of Saint-Denis near Paris, and on the other hand from the bones of Karl-Wilhelm Naundorff, who had claimed to be Louis XVII and was buried as such in Delft. The examination by Jean-Jacques Cassiman and Els Jehaes proved that the young man in St Denis was related to Marie-Antoinette, and Naundorff was not.

Margaret of York this would require more work and further research. The remains of Margaret's nephews, the so-called 'Princes in the Tower', present their own problems, and the skeleton of Edward IV, Margaret's brother, though still buried in St George's Chapel, in Windsor Castle, is not accessible.⁷¹ To reach a final conclusion concerning the finds of 1955 comparative DNA tests are needed on all these bones and on the remains of Margaret's closest relatives.

Conclusion

As said above we do not know for certain whether any bones of Margaret were found. It is still possible that the human remains found in 1955 are hers. It would be necessary to establish first of all whether these remains, which have been frequently handled and exhibited, are still suitable for scientific tests and whether science has advanced sufficiently to produce the desired result. We also need to know how much all this would cost, and whether the town of Malines or any other institution would be prepared to bear the expense. If the answer to these questions is negative, then, I think, it would be right to give the various human remains, now kept in boxes in the archives, a proper burial – but in such a way that they would still be available for research at some future date.

Since the end of the sixteenth century nothing remains of Margaret's magnificent funeral monument in the church of the Grey Friars. In 2000 the *Richard III Society* put up a plaque with the text of her epitaph and her coat of arms held by an angel. This plaque was placed on the outside wall of the choir. Malines itself, however, has paid little tribute to this English princess, who, as Charles the Bold's widow and Lady of Malines, contributed greatly to the wealth and status of the town in late fifteenth and early sixteenth century; there is no doubt that this was the most glorious period of its history.⁷² On the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, 26 June 2003, Aloïs Jans, honorary president of the *Koninklijke Kring voor Oudheidkunde, Letteren en Kunst van Mechelen*, made a strong plea for a more substantial memorial to Margaret. He suggested using the so-called Portioncula-chapel which protrudes from the choir of the

⁷¹ Excavated in 1789 but reburied; report and illustrations of grave and skeleton in *Vetusta Monumenta*, Society of Antiquaries of London, 7 vols., London 1747-1906, vol. 3, pp. 1-4. Some of the king's long hair was cut off and pieces survive in various collections all over England, *ex inf.* Livia Visser-Fuchs. See A.F. Sutton and L. Visser-Fuchs, *The Royal Burials of the House of York at Windsor*, Appendix, [forthcoming].

⁷² W. Prevenier, 'Mechelen: "Lieu de Mémoire" van de Bourgondische Nederlanden', *Academiae Analecta (Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten)*, n.s. 9, Brussels 2001.

Grey Friars church like a glass cage. He envisaged a portrait or statue of Margaret, flanked by her coat of arms and those of her husband. An image of the princess from her book of hours could be used, perhaps in stained glass; lit from inside this could become an attractive and important tourist attraction. The executive committee of the *Koninklijke Kring* gave their support to his proposal.⁷³

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⁷³ *Mededelingenblad van de KKOLKM*, vol. 34 (2003), no. 4.

