

M

argaret, the Maid of Norway, who died 700 years ago, was the granddaughter of King Alexander III of Scotland. Her mother, also called Margaret after her own mother, a sister to King Edward I of England, had been married off, in a political union, to King Erik of Norway – she was 21 years old at the time, he only 14 (1281).

The Maid of Norway was born the following year, and her mother died soon after. The heir to the Scottish throne was Alexander, the only son of Alexander III, but he died at 19, soon after his sister in Norway, and he left no children. The infant Margaret became heir to the Scottish throne.

Her grandfather, Alexander III, was then a widower, and he married again, hoping for another son. The following year, however, he was killed in a fall from his horse while riding home by night, and then Margaret, aged 3 years, became Queen of Scots (March, 1286).

Without an effective ruler, Scotland fell into disarray, with the Baliols, Bruces and Comyns fighting for power. In England, Edward I was scheming to unite Scotland with England under his own rule. To this end, he decided that his son and heir, Prince Edward, must marry Margaret Queen of Scots, in spite of the blood relationship between them – the prince was a first-cousin of the Maid's mother. Edward I obtained a dispensation from Rome, and demanded the marriage.

The Maid's father, Erik, himself only 21 years old objected to handing over his 7-year-old daughter, but he was over-ruled by his Parliament, who had been heavily bribed by Edward. The Scottish regents, six guardians of the realm, who feared invasion by England, and also could see how the various factions were destroying the nation, were forced to agree to the match, as the least of three evils.

IN THE AUTUMN OF 1290, the child Margaret, Maid of Norway, Queen of Scots and heir to the Norwegian throne, set sail for Scotland. She was 7 years old.

The Commissioners of England and of Scotland set out to travel north to meet her – the expense account says they were going to Orkney, which at that time belonged to Norway. This contemporary list traces their journey north and back again. Another deed from the same period is a list of the valuable gifts sent by Edward to the Scots, to mark the occasion – gold cups and bowls, elaborately decorated and all carefully priced. The Commissioners took with them a gift of gingerbread for the child.

The Commissioners, Scots and English, had reached Skelbo Castle, on Loch Fleet, in the parish of Dornoch, when word came that the young queen was dead. She had been taken ill on board ship, and although the ship put in to Orkney, she died there, probably in Kirkwall, at the end of September, 1290. It is not known what illness she had: possibly it was dehydration due to seasickness, which can quickly kill a young child.

The Commissioners spent two nights in Skelbo, discussing the situation. Then, perhaps surprisingly, they continued their journey as far as Wick. Presumably they needed proof of the child's death, especially in view of her father's reluctance to send her to Scotland; so much was at stake that they had to be certain of the truth before returning to King Edward. Whether the body was brought to Wick from Kirkwall before it was returned to Norway we do not know. Perhaps they met with eye-witnesses from Orkney whom they could trust. The child's body was sent back to her father, and she was buried in Christ's Kirk, Bergen, beside her mother.

This death was not the end of Edward's ambitions to take Scotland, but it made them more difficult to achieve. Through the reign of John Baliol, and the rising under William Wallace, Edward was invading and planning to subjugate Scotland. In 1305 he took Scotland by force, earning himself the name of 'Hammer of the Scots.' Wallace was betrayed, captured and executed.

The next patriot to rise against Edward was Robert Bruce. His victory over Edward's son at Bannockburn in 1314 put a stop to England's hopes of annexing Scotland. The loser at Bannockburn was Edward II, formerly that same Prince Edward, one year younger than the Maid, who was to have been her bridegroom. The sad death of that young child in Orkney had perhaps proved ultimately to be a blessing for her country's independence.