The first “life” of Margherita Colonna was composed by her older brother, the Roman senator Giovanni Colonna. It was begun shortly after her death on 30 December 1280 and was completed before 1285.

Our translation is based on the text edited in DV, 111–88, compared with Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense ms. 104, folios 1–26.¹ We have found very few errors in Oliger’s edition, and we have accepted the vast majority of his emendations where passages seem to have been miscopied by the scribe or corrupted at an earlier stage of transmission. Chapter numbers follow those established by Oliger, but for paragraph breaks within chapters we have sometimes deviated from his editorial decisions.

¹ For Vita I and Vita II, we have had the benefit of the Italian translation recently published in Attilio Cadderi (P. Carlo, O.F.M.), Beata Margherita Colonna (1255–1280): Le due vite scritte dal fratello Giovanni, senatore di Roma e da Stefania, monaca di San Silvestro in Capite, ed. Celeste Fornari and Luigi Borzi (Palestrina, 2010). We have generally preferred a style of translation that stays closer to the Latin, but Cadderi’s Italian has been helpful in considering possible interpretations of difficult passages.
CHAPTER I. HERE BEGINS THE LIFE OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARGHERITA, OF THE FAMILY NAME COLONNA

Margherita was born of a noble line of Romans. While she remained “in her family household,” not yet having left the secular world but having lost her more worthy parent, she came under the tutelage of her mother and her brothers. Then, while she was still a very young girl, her mother died. But although she was released from a mother’s oversight, she did not misuse the freedom granted her to do as she pleased; rather, she willingly placed herself under the control and direction of the elder of her brothers so that she might live with him in a more modest fashion. Yet when she had set out in the service of Christ, she instead stayed under the power and guardianship of her more worthy brother [Giacomo], who had inspired her toward a holy manner of life. This [brother, Giacomo], because of both the holy esteem in which he was held and his accumulated accomplishments, was raised to the ser-

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2. “Incipit vita beate Margarite virginis cognomine de columpna” is in red as an overall title, while also taking the place usually allotted to chapter titles in the manuscript. Oliger added in brackets his own chapter title, “De ortu et prima eius iuventute.”

3. Margherita’s birth can be placed ca. 1254–55.


5. That is, her father, Oddone Colonna, who died in 1256 or 1257.

6. Her mother was Margherita Orsini. Her brothers Giovanni and Giacomo are featured prominently in this text; she also had three other brothers named Oddone, Matteo, and Landolfo.

7. Margherita Orisini died ca. 1265–66, according to Dv, 80.

8. This is our conjecture where a word is missing (with space left) in the manuscript.

9. A word is again missing from the manuscript (with space left), and Oliger’s conjecture of senioris seems sound. The passage would thus refer to Giovanni Colonna.

10. The sentence foreshadows her later decision to turn away from the secular world and Giovanni Colonna’s household.
vice of the universal church and now occupies the most worthy office of cardinal.\textsuperscript{11}

While dwelling in the world, she therefore kept herself unsullied by it.\textsuperscript{12} For chastity had been inborn in her mind, and it grew with her from infancy.\textsuperscript{13} As the unsteady years of blooming girlhood approached, she became increasingly modest, ever more sure in her progress, bearing a heart wise in age while still tender in years. Just as in all her deeds and acts there was nothing worthy of reproach, so there was no one who would speak ill of her,\textsuperscript{14} for the Lord was always watching over her.\textsuperscript{15}

**CHAPTER II. ON HER VIRGINITY, AND THE VISION BETWEEN THE ANGELS\textsuperscript{16}**

Indeed, she was a wise virgin,\textsuperscript{17} so chaste and modest, just as widespread reputation and the judge of truth proclaimed her to be. Thus many noblemen longed for her hand in marriage, inspired more by the firmest belief in her goodness than enticed by an ample dowry or her high birth. Indeed, in their quest for marriage some preferred her to her older sister

\begin{itemize}
  \item 11. Giacomo was named cardinal deacon of Santa Maria in Via Lata by Nicholas III (who as Giangaetano Orsini was first cousin to Margherita Colonna and her brothers) on 12 March 1278.
  \item 12. Cf. James 1:27.
  \item 13. Job 31:18.
  \item 15. This is the first example of the author’s recurring habit of drawing a moral at the end of each chapter.
  \item 16. This chapter title was never copied into the space left for it. Instead it is found only in a highly abbreviated cursive hand in the margin. Generally, chapter numbers (but not titles) were noted in a faint contemporary hand in the margin; this is the only case where a title is thus noted. Olier assumed it could be treated as the author’s original intention, and we have followed him by including it here.
  \item 17. Cf. Matthew 25:1–4; and Officium rhythmicum in festo s. Clarae, ed. Giovanni Boccali, “Testi liturgici antichi per la festa di santa Chiara,” 155; also first Antiphon for Matins in *AH*, vol. 5, no. 54, p. 158.
\end{itemize}
of marriageable age. But, by God’s will, obstacles stood in the way while the wise virgin’s decision still remained unknown.

During this time, while her older brother [Giovanni], with whom she was then living, was busy finding her an earthly husband, her more worthy brother [Giacomo], the one just mentioned, in a more worthy fashion tried to betroth her in a more worthy marriage. He had been educated in goodness from the cradle itself, and, having come into the lot of Aaron while studying in Bologna, he was advanced into the blessing of sweetness and became that merchant of the heavenly pearl, who when he had found it gave up all his possessions in order to obtain it.

Thus it came to pass that [Giacomo] had to return home to arrange his father’s financial obligations, according to God’s will. Then he preached the pearl [of wisdom] hidden in his heart to his Margherita; and like an envoy [of God] he endeavored to consecrate this virgin to the Son of the Virgin. He explained that in earthly marriages happiness is

18. Vita I, ch. 6, states that Margherita actually had two older sisters of marriageable age still at home. In fact, Margherita is known to have had at least two older sisters. Giacoma married Pietro Conti, and a sister of unknown name married Oddone di Sant’Eustachio. An older sister with six children is mentioned in Vita II, ch. 18, who may or may not have been identical with one of the two previously mentioned.

19. DV, 80–81, plausibly puts these events ca. 1272.

20. Aaron (older brother of Moses) was the first high priest of the Israelites. But Giacomo Colonna was never ordained as a priest, so the passage probably refers to his assuming the title of deacon.


22. Psalm 20:3.

23. The Latin “Margarite celestis” is a play on Margherita’s name (margarita means “pearl” in Latin), and on the biblical comparison of the kingdom of heaven to a priceless pearl.


25. Oddone Colonna had been dead for some fifteen years at this point, so these were long-lasting testamentary questions.

26. Margaritam, again the common play on words.

27. Cf. 2 Corinthians 11:2.
fleeting and ends in grief after many woes and sorrows. But, by con- 
trast, in never-ending marriages where bodily integrity remains, the soul 
is betrothed to a heavenly spouse. For in these [eternal marriages], if 
there is some initial weariness, it lasts only a little while or disappears 
quickly, because of the comforts that according to the multitude of sorrows 
give joy to the soul. Instead, the soul rejoices without end when it is fi-
nally brought to the marriage chamber of the longed-for spouse. Often 
and more often again he repeated these points and others like them to 
his listener. In divinely eloquent words, and seizing every opportunity 
of time and place, he beat upon the ears of this virgin. And the virgin will-
ingly heard his words, and now sought times at which she would be free 
to listen secretly. Her soul was transfixed by the piercing sword of the 
word of God, and at that moment she first resolved to preserve her vir-
ginity from then on, dedicating it to God in all humility. Moreover, her 
brother’s preaching could not have been in vain. For he advised, as was 
his practice, that one begin a conversation with a prayer that one not 
speak in vain. For a seed sown upon good ground yields fruit a hundred 
fold.

Of the two brothers who were working at cross purposes as to the 
place in life that the virgin should occupy, the efforts of one [brother, 
Giovanni], came to nothing, and his concern was in vain. For after com-
plicated negotiations, he promised this virgin, without her knowledge, to

28. The text actually moves into the present tense here to give Giacomo’s ex-
hortation an air of urgency. We nevertheless translate in the historical past.
30. As Oliger noted, there may be an echo here of Thomas of Celano’s Leg-
enda S. Claræ 3.5–6, though there is no verbal match. See Giovanni Boccali, Legenda 
latina sanctae Claræ virginis assisienis (Santa Maria degli Angeli: Edizioni Porziuncola, 
2001), 100; and Regis J. Armstrong, The Lady: Clare of Assisi, Early Documents 
32. Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:10.
33. Luke 8:5–8. This praise of Giacomo Colonna’s prayer and preaching is a 
good first indication of the text’s desire to laud the larger Colonna family generally 
as well as Margherita Colonna specifically.
a suitor whose noble birth and wealth were not unequal to her own. When [Margherita] heard what had been done, she was not at all pleased; yet the wise girl kept this to herself until the appropriate moment. The efforts of the other [brother, Giacomo], however, were not in vain. For he debated many issues with his brother, even if he did not then disclose the as yet unripe decision of the virgin concerning those matters about which he had been so persuasive, because the virgin wanted her hand in deeds to precede her tongue in words, and her promise to be given by its execution. The wise man nevertheless discerned what she would do at the right moment, bending her soul to his holy advice.

Before the more worthy brother [Giacomo] was given final confirmation in a letter from the virgin (for he had left his home and his other brother), God showed him a lofty indication of his sister’s future status with a wondrous prophetic sign. He was praying ceaselessly for his sister, beseeching the poor and the friends of God whom he knew to be worthy, obtaining their consent to pray for her, adding devotion upon devotion, asking help from the flocks of saints—especially from the holy virgins by whose example he was praying that she would be instructed and consecrated—that they would intercede with the Son of the Virgin so that his sister’s “heart” would be made “immaculate and her body” not be corrupted.

Therefore, upon the arrival of the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Margherita, who has been listed in the catalogue of saints for many years, he was filled with greater devotion to her on behalf of his sister who

34. *Vita II*, ch. 2, calls this potential husband a “proconsul.”

35. Giacomo had presumably returned to Bologna at this point. It is worth noting that the first vision in the text is experienced not by Margherita but by Giacomo.

shared the same name of Margherita. That day he dined with the Friars and saw to it that they solemnly celebrated Mass in honor of the virgin whose feast it was. And wholeheartedly committing himself to that same devotion, he fed pilgrims and the harborless in his own lodgings. And when everything had been solemnly carried out as it should, in the middle of the day when everyone else in the house had retired for their midday nap, he remained alone in the garden, in back where there is a meadow, and devoted himself completely to reading the legend of the most blessed virgin whose feast he was celebrating. And as he came to the passage where it reads, “Margherita, virgin, come to the repose of your Christ!” he was immediately transformed. And, as though led to a performance, he saw his sister between two guardian angels, carried through the air by their efforts. He saw this and marveled and watched intently for as long as he was able; and the whole time he was able to recognize his sister. After an hour the vision began to shift, so that the house now blocked his sight. Then he ran, and racing through the house he came outside to the square in front of the house where the miraculous vision was being directed. Once again he beheld her just as he had seen

37. According to popular belief the early virgin saint Margaret/Margherita was martyred under Diocletian after refusing to give up her faith. Her feast day is 20 July, and although the year in question here is not entirely certain, 20 July 1272 seems likely.

38. The Latin fratres (when not used in a biological sense) can generally be taken to refer to Franciscans in this text; the passage therefore indicates the Franciscans of Bologna. The earliest permanent Franciscan community in that city was founded in 1219, presumably as a house of study. It grew rapidly and seems to have served as a host for Giacomo Colonna during his own time studying in Bologna. For Franciscan education, see Neslihan Şenocak, The Poor and the Perfect: The Rise of Learning in the Franciscan Order, 1209–1310 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).


41. One suspects a scribal error or omission in the Latin, which reads, “et perspexit quam diu potuit et potuit usquequo sororem agnovit.”
her, in the middle between the two [angels]. And just as he had known her and known whom she was with before, so here he recognized her again, until the vision took itself up on high and flew off, away from the sight of his steady gaze.

Of course from such a vision he concluded that he was seeing that she had been brought out of prison to praise the name of the Lord. But, in fact, it was not so! In truth it signified the passage out of Egypt of the daughter of Israel. Her brother [Giacomo] had not yet heard of this change, though it had clearly occurred. But a short while later, through a certain written prophecy, the virgin let him know that she had left her house and her brother [Giovanni], going to reside at Mount [Prenestino], until she should arrive “at the Mount which is Christ.”

We have seen that this did indeed come to pass. For although she had longed to build her own monastery where she could enclose herself with her followers, vowing service to the Lord, and though she had decided to go to the monastery at Assisi, she was able to do neither of these things. She was prevented, until—after extreme self-deprivation, innumerable expenses, the endurance of great sickness, in all patience, as the story of her life will show—she “might shatter the alabaster bottle

42. Psalms 121:4; 141:8. That is, Giacomo interpreted this vision at first as meaning that his sister had died.

43. Cf. Numbers 33:38; Deuteronomy 4:46; etc. That is, Margherita’s passage out of “bondage” from the secular world.

44. The Latin is “sub quodam vaticinio per transcriptum.” The use of the word vaticinio is interesting, indicating a prophecy or prediction about the future, not just a report of Margherita’s current resolve. This would seem to be the same “letter” referred to several paragraphs previously.

45. The phrase “ad montem, qui Christus est” is from a collect for the Mass of St. Catherine. CO, no. 1521; Van Dijk, Sources, 2:305; Robert Lippe, ed., Missale Romanum Mediolani, 1474 (London: Harrison and Sons, 1899), 402.

46. The rest of this paragraph foreshadows Margherita’s later story.

47. That is, to join the community originally founded by Clare of Assisi at San Damiano, which had moved within the city walls of Assisi in 1260.

48. 2 Timothy 4:2.
of her body”⁴⁹ in the houses of the aforesaid Mount [Prenestino],⁵⁰ and the church in the nearby region might breathe with the fragrance of her good fame, and she might move on to Christ.

CHAPTER III. ON THE BLESSED VIRGIN’S SPEECH TO HER AND THE INSPIRATION GIVEN TO HER

For good reason I have briefly wandered from the direct narrative of her life, but I will now return to it. The day comes and the time is fulfilled⁵¹ when it was incumbent upon the brother [Giovanni] who had arranged her betrothal to now plan the virgin’s trousseau, for he was still unaware of her determined resolution. When he sent her older sister⁵² to ask her what she would like to have prepared in the way of costly garments, [Margherita] listened with disdain; and if colorful or⁵³ luxurious items were proposed, she laughed all the more scornfully. From this response her brother concluded that she was not happy with the husband to whom she had been promised. But it was not, as her brother supposed, because she sought a man of another social status, but because she was saving herself for Christ, to whom she afterward vowed herself. When he asked her some days later whether the proposed husband was pleasing to her, or whether someone else should be sought,⁵⁴ she told him plainly that if she had been intending to take any man for a husband she

⁴⁹. Cf. Thomas of Celano, Legenda S. Clarae 5.16, in Boccoli, Legenda, 112, and Armstrong, Lady, 288 (cf. also Mark 14:3).
⁵⁰. It is noteworthy that the plural (“in domibus Montis”) is always used to refer to “houses” of the compound at Mount Prenestino that Margherita and her followers inhabited.
⁵¹. Cf. Jeremiah 50:27; Mark 1:15; Genesis 29:21; etc.
⁵². On the ambiguous references to Margherita’s sisters, see note 18 above.
⁵³. Olinger read “varia a preciosa” and emended to “varia aut preciosa”; in fact, the manuscript reads “aut.”
⁵⁴. Giovanni Colonna’s apparent willingness (in his own recounting) to consider Margherita’s wishes is notable and perhaps helps to explain the flexibility with which her particular religious vocation found expression with family support.
would have been content to leave the selection entirely to her brother; but she had now vowed her body and soul to Christ in pursuit of chastity.

This questioning took place after she had made her vow, but let the events that had happened to her before that time be narrated here.\(^{55}\) The prudent virgin, giving thought to the situation, since she was no longer able to hide her decision to preserve her virginity, understood very well that revealing it would upset her brother [Giovanni], who loved her dearly; yet she chose to upset her brother and suffer the consequences rather than to retreat from her sacred undertaking. So she turned once more to Mary, the Mother of God, for whose Son she had started down this path, and poured herself entirely into praying that [Mary], the very lily of virginity, would guide her with advice and help, strengthen and support her, and preserve the person who was preserving herself unspoiled for her Son. After this earnest prayer, she went to bed the following night and allowed no other thought to enter her mind.

And as she slept, in the quiet of midnight,\(^{56}\) the glorious Mother of God, the Virgin Mary, who has never failed when called upon, who had been most devoutly appealed to by the virgin girl, appeared to her. [The Virgin Mary], in whom the remedy of the salvation of the entire world is placed, deigned to come herself in person, as the bearer of tidings of deliverance. She came riding upon a certain chariot, preceded by great flashes of light and by a shining too great for the human eye to bear, like shining rays flashing from the rising sun, \textit{and a light shined in the room}.\(^{57}\) The chariot came right up to the bed where [Margherita] lay. And standing before her, the blessed Virgin said to her, \textit{Your prayer has been heard, and I have come here to fulfill it.} The soul of the virgin girl melted after the Mother of Joy spoke to her.\(^{59}\) And feeling deeply the inexpressible sweetness of this speech, [Margherita] poured forth an as-

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\(^{55}\) This is the first example of the author’s penchant for storytelling in the form of flashbacks. The vision preceded Margherita’s formal refusal of marriage and her flight to Mount Prenestino.


\(^{57}\) Acts 12:7.


\(^{59}\) Canticles 5:6.
tonishing shower of tears, so that afterwards she found her pillowcase soaked as though it had been submerged in a running stream. Thus, touched by the spirit of God, she answered the Virgin, “I give thanks to that spring from which all grace flows, our salvation, whom you, a virgin, bore in your womb; and I know well it will be fulfilled.” Then, not being strong enough to endure the brilliance of such a light any longer, she turned over on her other side. Then the chariot went forward along that side of the bed to which the girl had turned. And once more the Virgin Mother of God stood right before her and added these words to what she had already said: “I will not leave you.” With this said, the chariot began to move and to recede with its splendor. But before it was gone, the sleeping virgin awoke; and rising up she saw the chariot and its undercarriage with the vanishing vision of light. At once, “because the grace of the Holy Spirit knows no slow undertakings,” even before she left her bed or did anything else, this daughter vowed a vow of Jacob to her Christ, where she consecrated her soul and flesh more firmly to Him. She later gave an unheard-of report about this matter: that no hesitation ever tantalized her mind concerning what she had sworn, because the Mother of Truth, who had declared that her prayer had been heard, was incapable of speaking anything but the truth.

Great is the Lord and exceedingly to be praised in the city of our God, in the virgin Margherita, His holy mountain, where He has shown forth so kindly! Let us raise our eyes to her, and let us learn from the passion of her devotion, so that help may come to us as it came to her when she opened wide the mouth of her desire to receive grace, and the Lord filled it; for it is written: Open your mouth wide and I will fill it. For Truth says in the Gospel: Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and

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60. Hebrews 13:5.
63. Psalm 47:2.
64. Based on Psalm 120:2, the phrase echoes a collect used for feasts of the Virgin and other female saints. CO, 2507; Van Dijk, Sources, 2:122, 182, 187–89, 272, 316; Lippe, Missale Romanum Mediolani, 304, 442.
65. Psalm 80:11.
it shall be opened to you.\textsuperscript{66} Because she asked, she received; because she sought, she found; because she knocked, it was opened to her. But woe to us! Because we do not have such desires, grace does not come. For again the Lord is rich to all that call upon Him.\textsuperscript{67} And there is no difference between people of today and those of long ago, but He is near to all that call upon Him in truth,\textsuperscript{68} just as in our time He was nearby in aid of the virgin Margherita, [and remains so] right up to now.\textsuperscript{69}

Therefore let us not wonder when we hear that she turned to the other side because of the beating brilliance of the light, for one must believe that the virgin did nothing other than what was pleasing to God; her soul, melted by these addresses and tasting the spirit,\textsuperscript{70} was unable to wish or to do anything else. But let us say that it was fittingly done as ordained by God, as when human weakness finds itself in the face of divine discourse, as it is written of Moses, Moses hid his face for he dared not look at God.\textsuperscript{71}

CHAPTER IV. ON THE CHANGE MADE IN HER BY THE SPEECH OF THE MOTHER OF GOD

Inexpressible is the sweetness of the Lord! The Prophet marvels at how great it is, and gives name to the multitude of its immensity, and so I will not attempt to describe how after those addresses he hid [this sweetness] in His virgin fearing him,\textsuperscript{72} and how He brought everything around to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{66} Matthew 7:7.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Romans 10:12.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Psalm 144:18.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Olinger emended “proximus diebus nostris virginis Margarite” to “proximis diebus nostris virgini Margarite.” We have preferred to follow the manuscript reading. The last two words \textit{usque huc} were added in the margin, but apparently by the original scribal hand.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Canticles 5:6.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Exodus 3:6. It is notable that Giovanni must try to interpret Margherita’s idiosyncratic vision in a way that points toward a moral lesson, thus indicating that he really was reporting what his sister had related, with all its quirks.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Cf. Psalm 30:20.
\end{itemize}