

The Medieval World: Thomas Becket

Aims

- To help students interpret religious objects from the medieval world
- To help students use evidence to find out about the shrine of Thomas Becket in Canterbury.
- To encourage students to compare a range of sources in their enquiries

Description

- A sequence of 11 slides to explore an overall question: 'What can we safely say about the shrine of Thomas Becket?'
- Slides 2-6 introduce students to the veneration of saints in the medieval world through the medium of relics and reliquaries
- Slides 7-11 explore objects related to the murder of Thomas Becket and pilgrimage to the shrine of Becket at Canterbury.

Teaching ideas

- The presentation can be used on a whiteboard with the whole class or could be followed by individual students or groups.
- Use slide 11 to compare the evidence and consider a series of statements about Becket.
- Explore further the idea of relics carrying with them special powers derived from the holiness of Jesus and the saints, for example for healing.
- Ask the students to consider what aspects of Becket's murder made it very likely that he would be remembered as a martyr for the Christian faith.
- Students can explore other aspects of pilgrimage in the medieval period: other shrines, who went on pilgrimages, the experience of pilgrimage etc.
- You can take the exploration further by considering modern examples of martyrs, of places connected with significant occurrences, the power of relics and of the belongings of famous people.

Notes on the pictures

Slide 2: summary of the objects in slides 3-6

Slide 3: reliquary made to house a relic of the Holy Thorn; made in France about AD 1400-1410. The thorn is placed behind a crystal window and is identified by a Latin inscription: 'Ista est una spinea corone / Domine nostri ihesu cristi' ('This is a thorn from the crown of Our Lord Jesus Christ').

Slide 4: necklace or pendant designed to carry a relic of the Holy Thorn; made in France about AD 1340. The pendant is made out of gold and amethystine crystal. Inside are three leaves decorated with scenes of the life of Christ. On the bottom left-hand side of the leaf is a picture of a king and queen praying. We don't know for certain who owned it but the workmanship points to King Philip IV of France (1328-1350) and his wife Jeanne de Bourgogne.

Slide 5: gold and enamel reliquary cross; probably from Constantinople; early 11th century AD. The cross is hinged so that the two sides can be opened to reveal a relic.

Slide 6: reliquary of Saint Eustace; from Switzerland; about AD 1210. The head is an idealized image of St. Eustace intended to hold fragments of his skull; it consists of a wooden core covered in silver plates with precious stones.

Slides 7-8: alabaster panel showing the murder of Saint Thomas (?1118-70), Archbishop of Canterbury; from England; about AD 1450-1500.

- Becket is kneeling in prayer before an altar. On the altar is a chalice. Behind him are four knights, two of whom are attacking him with swords. The figure with the cross, behind the altar, is Edward Grim, a clerk from Cambridge.
- Alabaster panels such as this are of a standard size, and would have belonged to larger altarpieces.

Slide 9: enamel reliquary of St Thomas Becket; made in Limoges about 1210. The reliquary once held the real or attributed remains of Becket. At least forty caskets like this were made in Limoges enamel which was highly-valued across Medieval Europe.

Slide 10: pilgrim badge of St Thomas Becket; from England; 13th century AD. A new shrine to Becket was built in 1220 and was highly-decorated.

Slide 11: Selection of objects relating to Becket including:

- lead alloy pilgrim badge of St Thomas Becket; from England; late 14th century AD.
- gold and diamond finger-ring showing Becket, standing before an altar, with a sword piercing his head; from England; 15th century AD.
- lead alloy ampulla (for holding holy water) showing Becket flanked by two knights; from England; about AD1200. On the back is the Latin inscription: optim[vs] egror[vm] fit toma bonor[vm] (Thomas is the best doctor for the worthy sick)

Background Information

- The Holy Thorn is the wreath of thorns placed on the head of Jesus Christ at his crucifixion.
- Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, was murdered on 29 December, 1170 in Canterbury Cathedral by four knights. It violated the laws of Sanctuary, which ought to have given Becket immunity from arrest or molestation in a holy place. Edward Grim's biographical account of Becket's life is one of the most well-known and used primary sources for the murder.
- Becket was canonized (made a saint) three years after his death in 1173 and his shrine became an important focus for pilgrimage. The relics of St Thomas were moved from his original tomb in the crypt to a rich, new shrine in 1220. The shrine was richly decorated with gold and precious stones. It was destroyed during the Reformation.
- Pilgrim badges were usually made of cheap materials like lead alloy and pewter. They were purchased as souvenirs. Pilgrims bought them at shrines as evidence that pilgrimage had been achieved or for penitential reasons. Canterbury produced a larger variety of pilgrim signs than any other shrine in Europe.