

Large print exhibition text



**Thomas Becket**  
**murder and the**  
**making of a saint**

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# **Thomas Becket: murder and the making of a saint**

On 29 December 1170, four knights from King Henry II's entourage murdered Archbishop Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral. News of the violent crime sent shock waves across Europe. Just over two years later, the pope made Becket a saint. His shrine attracted hundreds of thousands of pilgrims and his story has echoed through the ages.

## Introduction

### **Housing Becket's relics**

Three knights rush in as Becket prays at an altar. Horrified monks watch as one strikes the fatal blow. Above, the archbishop's body is lowered into a tomb and angels carry his soul to heaven.

This precious box once held a Becket relic, either a fragment of his bones or a piece of blood-stained clothing. Made within 20 years of his death, it is one of the earliest and largest Becket reliquary caskets to survive.

About 1180–90

Limoges, France

Copper-alloy, gilding, enamel, rock crystal, wooden core  
Victoria and Albert Museum. Purchased with the assistance of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, with contributions from the Po Shing Woo Foundation, The Art Fund, the Friends of the V&A, the estate of T.S. Eliot, the Headley Trust and many private donations

### **ArtFund**

## Introduction

### **Wall quote:**

The voice of the blood and the cry of the brains spilt and scattered by the bloody swords of the devil's henchmen filled heaven and earth with a great tumult.

Benedict of Peterborough, Monk of Canterbury, 1173

# The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

1120–70

**Having risen to one of the most powerful positions in England, Becket had a dramatic fall from grace and found himself an outcast.**

Thomas Becket and Henry II were born into different worlds. Becket was the quick-witted, ambitious son of a London merchant. Henry, heir to the English throne, spent most of his childhood in France where he later controlled vast territories stretching from Normandy down to the Pyrenees.

Becoming king in 1154 after decades of civil war, Henry needed people he could trust. He promoted Becket, an outsider, to extraordinary positions of power: first royal chancellor then Archbishop of Canterbury. A blossoming friendship between king and commoner ended dramatically when Becket dared to question Henry's attempts to curtail the Church's authority.

The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

To avoid the king's retribution he fled to the Continent, fearing for his life.



## **Becket's London**

**The London Becket knew was a thriving metropolis and one of medieval Europe's largest and wealthiest cities.**

Becket was born in 1120 in Cheapside, a stone's throw from St Paul's Cathedral. He had a comfortable childhood. His parents Gilbert and Matilda were immigrants from Northern France, and part of a wealthy merchant community living in the commercial heart of London. The city was a hub of activity where, according to Becket's clerk and biographer William FitzStephen, '...from every nation that is under heaven, merchants rejoice to bring their trade in ships.'

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **Becket's personal seal**

At the bottom of this document is the only surviving wax impression from Becket's seal matrix, which contained a Roman gem engraved with a figure of Apollo.

The Latin text '**Sigillvm Tome Lund**' (seal of Thomas of London) shows Becket's pride in the city of his birth.

Confirmation of a grant issued by Becket as  
Archbishop of Canterbury (displayed face down)  
1162–70  
England  
Parchment, wax  
On loan from The National Archives

### **Image caption:**

Detail of Becket's seal showing fingerprints on the lower left.

Image © The National Archives

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **Naming Thomas**

Born in December 1120, Becket was probably named in honour of St Thomas the Apostle, whose feast day then fell on 21 December. This bowl, found in the River Thames, is engraved with scenes of the Apostle's mission to India. The story begins in the top right with Christ and St Thomas and ends at the centre with a king ordering the Apostle's execution.

About 1120–30  
Probably England  
Copper-alloy  
British Museum

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **New sculpture for a local church**

London during Becket's childhood was a flourishing city filled with the sounds of building work. Featuring entwined serpents, this carving was probably made for one of the many churches being rebuilt in stone. It was discovered on the site of a medieval cloth market close to Becket's home on Cheapside.

About 1125–50  
London, England  
Limestone  
British Museum

The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

## **Ice-skating at Moorfields**

‘Crowds of young men go out to play on the ice. Some ... fit shinbones of cattle on their feet, tying them round their ankles ... and are carried along as fast as a flying bird or a bolt from a catapult.’

William FitzStephen, Becket’s clerk and biographer, 1173–4

Young Londoners in search of fun went skating on the frozen marshes of Moorfields, just north of the city walls. These skates have been worn smooth with use.

1100–1300

London, England

Bone

British Museum

### **Image caption:**

Two boys ice-skating and tobogganing, from a psalter, about 1320–30.

Image © The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford, MS. Douce 5, fol. 1v

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **Fine ceramics for the dining table**

Gilbert Becket was well-connected and his family would have played host to other members of London's civic community. New luxury ceramics were made for wealthy households like theirs.

This jug would have been used for serving water, wine or ale.

1150–1200

London, England

Glazed ceramic

British Museum

### **Playing board games**

In later life Becket enjoyed the tactical challenge of chess, but he may have grown up playing tables, a game similar to backgammon that was popular among Londoners. Hundreds of bone gaming-pieces like these have been found in the city.

1100–1300

London, England

Bone

British Museum

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **Studying abroad**

Around the age of 18 Becket went to study in Paris, a formative experience that laid the foundations for his rise. It was an exciting city, home to some of the greatest teachers of the time. The core curriculum focused on the Liberal Arts: grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. Personifications of these appear on the front and back of this casket.

About 1190–1200

England

Copper-alloy, gilding, enamel

Victoria and Albert Museum

### **Image caption:**

Grammar is shown in the roundel to the left. Rhetoric and Music are on the right. Philosophy, Nature and Knowledge appear on the sides of the casket.

Image © Victoria and Albert Museum

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **Wall quote:**

[Becket] was tall in stature, handsome in appearance, acute in intellect ... he possessed such great keenness of reason that he wisely solved unusual and difficult questions...

John of Salisbury, Becket's clerk and biographer, 1171–2



## **From clerk to courtier**

**Through contacts, ability and some luck, Becket achieved positions of great power and wealth.**

After three years in Paris, Becket returned to England. In search of new opportunities he seized upon the chance to work as a clerk for Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury, joining a group of ambitious young men. At the time Canterbury Cathedral was a centre of learning and artistic patronage. The legal and diplomatic training that Becket received in his nine years with Theobald was life-changing. In 1154 the archbishop recommended him as royal chancellor to the new king, Henry II, and the two men became great friends.

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **A powerful patron**

Archbishop Theobald, Becket's mentor, was head of Canterbury Cathedral's monastic community. In this document he outlines a new rule for monks who had fled or been expelled from the cathedral: anyone wanting to return would remain at the lowest rank. Theobald's wax seal (**left**) shows him dressed in robes and holding a staff. The cathedral's seal (**right**) has an image of the church with Christ in the doorway.

1155–61

Canterbury, England

Parchment, wax

Lent by the Chapter, Canterbury Cathedral

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **A bird's-eye view of the cathedral**

Major improvements were made to Canterbury Cathedral during Becket's lifetime, including the installation of an innovative waterworks system in the monastic complex. It provided the monks with clean water, a luxury at the time. This drawing, with the cathedral at the top, shows how fresh water (green) was pumped into the buildings and used water (red) was pumped out.

The Eadwine Psalter

Psalter: about 1150; drawing: 1160–70

Canterbury, England

Parchment

Trinity College Cambridge

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **Carvings for a sumptuous visual world**

Canterbury Cathedral was famous for its beautiful interior. Discovered in its grounds as part of a large sculptural group, these four carvings show **(in the case)** a beast holding a man's head in its mouth, and **(above)** a king, monster and man. They were made either for the cloister or as part of a screen, and were probably painted in vibrant colours.

About 1150–80

Canterbury, England

Limestone

King: lent by Canterbury Museums and Galleries

Beast, monster and man: lent by the Chapter,

Canterbury Cathedral

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **Becket promoted**

In 1154 Henry II appointed Becket royal chancellor. It was the best paid position in the royal household, earning him five shillings a day. As chancellor Becket was responsible for issuing documents in the king's name, like this one addressed to the citizens of Canterbury. The seal shows Henry enthroned, holding a sword and an orb. Becket is named as a witness with his new title 'Thomas the chancellor'.

1154–8

England

Parchment, wax, silk

Lent by Canterbury City Council

## **Archbishop and exile**

**In a surprise move Henry II chose Becket as Archbishop of Canterbury, promoting him to one of the highest positions in England.**

In 1162 Henry II nominated Becket as Archbishop of Canterbury, following Theobald's death. It was a controversial appointment. Becket was not a priest and until then had lived a worldly, secular life. The king wanted him to remain chancellor, hoping that having his friend in both positions would increase royal control over Church and State. This plan failed when Becket renounced the chancellorship and began to oppose Henry. In 1164, with tensions escalating, the archbishop escaped across the Channel.

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **Reading the case labels from right to left:**

#### **Becoming archbishop**

On 3 June 1162 Becket was consecrated as archbishop in a grand ceremony at Canterbury Cathedral. This panel from an altarpiece shows the moment of his transformation into the most senior religious figure in England. Becket sits between two bishops. Above him God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit preside, with two angels swinging censers.

1425–50

The Midlands, England

Alabaster

Private collection

#### **Quote:**

...from a secular man and a knight  
he [Henry II] fashioned an archbishop...

Gilbert Foliot, Bishop of London, 1162

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **The role of Henry of Blois**

Becket's consecration ceremony was led by Henry of Blois, Bishop of Winchester and Abbot of Glastonbury. Henry, a power broker and brother to Stephen, the previous king, witnessed first-hand the new archbishop's rise. He is shown here kneeling, holding an altar frontal and a crozier, his staff of office.

About 1150–71

England

Copper-alloy, enamel, gilding

British Museum



## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **Status symbols**

At his consecration Becket was given three objects that symbolised his new role, although none of them survive. A crozier showed that he was a spiritual shepherd leading his flock, a ring signified his marriage to the Church and a mitre conveyed his high status.

This rare crozier comes from the grave of a bishop of St Davids Cathedral and the ring from the grave of a bishop of Verdun. The mitre, one of the earliest English embroideries of its type, was kept for centuries at Sens Cathedral.

#### **Crozier**

Crook and upper knop about 1150; lower knop early 1200s  
England or Wales

Crook: copper-alloy, gilding; staff: wood, copper-alloy  
Eglwys Gadeiriol Tyddewi, Sir Benfro, Cymru, DU /  
St Davids Cathedral, Pembrokeshire, Wales, UK

#### **Ring**

1150–1200

France

Gold, sapphire

British Museum

# The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

## **Mitre**

About 1180–1230

England

Embroidered silk

Lent by the Diocese of Westminster

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **A portrait of Becket?**

Becket collected a large number of manuscripts. He left them to Canterbury Cathedral, but they have all been dispersed. This lavishly decorated copy of the New Testament Gospels is one he commissioned. It contains a gloss, or notes on the text summarising scholarly thoughts on the Bible, a great help to the new archbishop. The bust directly under the central figure of Christ may be the only surviving contemporary image of Becket.

About 1162–70

Probably France

Parchment

Trinity College Cambridge

### **Image caption:**

Detail showing the bust of an archbishop, possibly Becket.

Image © Trinity College Cambridge

## **Divided loyalties**

**Becket and Henry became embroiled in a fierce argument about the authority of the Church and Crown.**

Henry II saw Becket's rejection of the chancellorship in 1162 as a betrayal. Over the next two years their relationship disintegrated. One issue in particular divided them. The king demanded that churchmen accused of serious crimes be tried in secular rather than religious courts. Becket refused to endorse this infringement of the rights of the Church, provoking the king's outrage. The matter remained unresolved, with neither king nor archbishop willing to concede.

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **Wall quote:**

...very quickly you would turn your heart and favour away from me, which is now so great between us, and replace it with the most savage hatred...

Becket speaking to Henry II in 1162

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **Dissenting voices**

Before Becket became chancellor he worked alongside the renowned scholar John of Salisbury. As archbishop, he employed him. John's **Policraticus** is an electrifying work of political thought brimming with controversial ideas about authority and who should wield it. He was particularly concerned with the abuse of power by kings. John dedicated the **Policraticus** to Becket and possibly presented him with this copy.

The Latin text beginning at the red letter 'H' reads: 'This sword is therefore accepted by the prince from the hand of the Church, although it still does not itself possess the bloody sword entirely. For while it has this sword, yet it is used by the hand of the prince, upon whom is conferred the power of bodily coercion, reserving spiritual authority for the papacy. The prince is therefore a sort of minister of the priests...'

About 1159–70

England

Parchment

Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **A dispute defines a reign**

Above all else, Henry II would be remembered for his clash with Becket. This genealogy of English kings shows them locked in argument. Enthroned on the left, Henry presses a finger emphatically into his palm. Becket raises a hand in disagreement.

On the right is Henry's son Richard I. To his left are three decapitated heads. Their headbands and caricatured features identify them as Muslim soldiers, 'Saracens', defeated during the Third Crusade in the Holy Land. Derogatory depictions of non-Christians were common in medieval Europe.

About 1307–27

England

Parchment

The British Library

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **God as the ultimate authority**

Made around the time of Becket and Henry's dispute, this reliquary triptych shows Justice at the heart of God's divine judgement. Piety and Mercy are shown holding up the scales of the figure of Justice. On either side are the people of the world and two busts, Almsgiving and Prayer. Angels called Judgement and Truth stand watch above them. On the side panels trumpeting angels wake the dead from their tombs.

About 1160–7

Probably Liège, Belgium

Copper-alloy, gilding, enamel, rock crystal, wooden core

Wyvern Collection, London



## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **New case:**

#### **Archbishop in exile**

With the situation spiralling out of control, Becket was brought before the king and accused of trumped-up crimes. Fearing for his life, on 2 November 1164 the archbishop fled abroad. He spent six years in exile under the protection of Henry's rival, Louis VII of France, returning on 2 December 1170. These fragments illustrating this turbulent period are all that survive from a manuscript of the life of Becket. They portray Henry as a vengeful tyrant and the archbishop as a steadfast defender of the Church.

The Becket Leaves

About 1230–40

England

Parchment

Private collection

## **Henry sends Becket's relatives into exile (below)**

Henry II punished Becket for leaving England without his permission, confiscating his land and wealth. On the left, the king orders the archbishop's family into exile. An armed knight pushes a man forwards and tramples on a woman clutching her baby. On the right, Becket reclines in bed, tended by a physician. Fasting, prayer and constant worry over his relationship with Henry have made him ill.

## **Becket says farewell to the pope (above)**

Becket found himself in France at the same time as Pope Alexander III, who was locked in disagreement with Frederick Barbarossa, an emperor with vast territories in central Europe. Like Becket, Alexander was in exile and sought protection from King Louis VII of France. After making peace the pope returned to Rome. This image shows him embracing Becket before their farewell. Alexander was later responsible for Becket's canonisation as a saint.

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **Peace negotiations (above)**

With a book in one hand and a candle in the other, Becket excommunicates his enemies, expelling them from the Church. A shocked crowd watches. To the right, he is shown with Henry II of England and Louis VII of France at a meeting to broker peace organised by Louis. The kings gesticulate angrily as Becket refuses to compromise and the talks fail.

### **An angry departure (below)**

Furious, Henry and Louis depart on horseback with their entourage. Twisting his body towards the kings, the archbishop raises a defiant finger, almost touching the word 'beatus' (blessed) above his head. On the right, Becket approaches a crowd who call for his blessing.

### **The coronation of the Young King (below)**

On 14 June 1170 Henry II had his son Henry, known as 'the Young King', crowned joint monarch in Westminster Abbey to secure the succession. The ceremony was conducted by Becket's rivals, the Archbishop of York and Bishop of London. They are shown on the left with the Young King. It was the Archbishop of Canterbury's ancient right to perform coronations and this undermined his authority. On the right Henry, at a banquet, hands his son a golden cup.

### **Becket and the pope learn of the coronation (above)**

On the left, a messenger brings Becket news of the Young King's coronation. In the next image Pope Alexander, who had forbidden the Archbishop of York to perform the sacred act, receives a complaint from Becket. He asks for permission to excommunicate the bishops involved in the ceremony, which the pope duly grants. This was a terrible punishment reserved for the most serious offences.

### **Becket prepares to sail to England (above)**

The coronation of the Young King spurred Becket into action and, after agreeing a fragile peace with Henry II, he decided to return to England. Fatefully, before leaving France he carried out the sentences of excommunication endorsed by the pope. In this image a messenger warns Becket of the dangers he faces at home, including armed men waiting to arrest him.

### **Becket arrives in England (below)**

As Becket's boat lands on the shores of Kent, eager crowds flock to greet him. Among them are two of Henry II's knights. They gesture threateningly but Becket remains serene, his right hand raised in blessing.

## The rise and fall of Thomas Becket

### **Captions for images:**

These images show the other sides of the pages displayed below.

Becket says farewell to the pope

Peace negotiations

Becket and the pope learn of the coronation

Becket prepares to sail to England

# Murder in the cathedral

1170

**After witnessing Henry II's fury, four knights made their way to Canterbury to arrest Becket.**

On 2 December, Becket returned to Canterbury and the cathedral he had not seen for six years.

At his Christmas court in Normandy, Henry learned that Becket had excommunicated the English bishops involved in his son's coronation. He flew into a rage, calling Becket a traitor and 'low-born clerk'. Four knights, Reginald FitzUrse, Hugh de Morville, Richard Brito and William de Tracy, heard the king's outburst. They hatched a plan to bring the archbishop to Henry and headed for England to arrest him.

Canterbury Cathedral, Becket's last sanctuary, would become the stage for his violent death.

## Murder in the cathedral

### **An eyewitness to the crime**

Above, the knights interrupt the archbishop's dinner in his palace. Below, on the left, they attack him inside the cathedral. The first knight severs a piece of Becket's head, shattering his weapon. Skull fragment and sword point fall to the ground. Edward Grim, a clerk who remained at the archbishop's side, is struck in the arm by another blow. On the right, pilgrims pray at Becket's tomb.

This illumination, one of the earliest known images of the murder, appears in a collection of letters relating to Becket's dispute with Henry II. It precedes an eyewitness account by Becket's friend John of Salisbury, who was one of five to record what they saw that day.

Alan of Tewkesbury's **Collection of the Letters of St Thomas**

About 1180–85

Cirencester, England

Parchment

The British Library



## Murder in the cathedral

### **Animation**

There is no narration in this animated film, but there are subtle sound effects and a re-enactment of a Gregorian chant from Vespers being sung in Canterbury Cathedral when Becket was murdered. The tolling of a bell marks the moment of his death.

Duration: about 2 minutes 45 seconds

Gregorian chant performed in 1996 by the Schola Gregoriana of Cambridge directed by musicologist Dr Mary Berry.

From a Herald record label recording, **Gregorian Chant from Canterbury Cathedral, The Martyrdom of Saint Thomas Becket: The Unfinished Vespers**

© and © 1996 Herald AV Publications and Schola Gregoriana Trust

# The making of a saint

**1170–1220**

**Hundreds of miracles were recorded at Canterbury and, within three years of his murder, Becket was made a saint.**

News of Becket's death spread across Europe like wildfire and was met with outrage. Henry II initially refused to punish the perpetrators and was widely implicated in the murder.

Miraculous cures were attributed to Becket and pilgrims in search of healing visited Canterbury. In the wake of the crime the monks restricted public access to the archbishop's tomb, but by Easter 1171 they opened the crypt due to overwhelming demand.

In recognition of his martyrdom and miracles, the pope canonised Becket as St Thomas of Canterbury in February 1173.

The making of a saint

Over the next fifty years, his legacy as a defender of the rights of the Church against royal tyranny became firmly established.

The making of a saint

**In the case opposite the panel, reading right to left:**

### **A rushed burial**

The spilling of blood had defiled the sanctity of the cathedral. In an attempt to cleanse this holy place the monks closed the doors to the public. The day after the murder they placed Becket's body in a marble tomb in the crypt to protect it from further desecration.

This striking image of the sombre ceremony shows five grieving monks. Three lower Becket's body into the tomb.

The Harley Psalter

Psalter: about 1200–25; miniatures: about 1175–1200

England

Parchment

The British Library

## The making of a saint

### **A new saint**

On 21 February 1173 the pope made Becket a saint, officially endorsing his burgeoning cult. In Limoges, France, jewel-like caskets were produced to hold his precious relics. Almost 50 survive, decorated with scenes of Becket's murder and burial. Found from Italy to Sweden, they reflect the new saint's widespread popularity. The political and religious networks that Becket fostered in life supported the European expansion of his cult after he was murdered.

**Left:** about 1210; **right:** about 1200–10

Limoges, France

Copper-alloy, gilding, enamel, wooden core

British Museum

The making of a saint

**Panel on the left-hand wall:**

## **The aftermath**

**As Becket's popularity grew, Henry II could not escape his association with the murder and publicly aligned himself with the new saint.**

Becket's transformation from archbishop to martyr was potentially disastrous for Henry II. To appease the pope he performed penance twice in Normandy in 1172.

He finally visited Canterbury two years later. In an astonishing public humiliation the king walked barefoot through the city and knelt before Becket's tomb. He acknowledged his involvement in the crime and was punished by monks. From then on, Henry adopted St Thomas as his protector.

Meanwhile, Becket's cult spread throughout Europe.

The making of a saint

Stories of his murder and miracles circulated, attracting thousands of pilgrims to Canterbury each year.

**Image caption:**

Henry II punished by monks at Becket's tomb

Image © The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford

The making of a saint

## **Henry's atonement**

Following his public penance in Canterbury, Henry II visited St Thomas's shrine regularly and made numerous gifts to the cathedral. In this document endorsed with his Great Seal he promises to protect the rights of the Canterbury monks in perpetuity.

1175

England

Parchment, wax

Lent by the Chapter, Canterbury Cathedral

## **A Becket casket in Italy**

Devotion to St Thomas was strong in southern Italy where Joan, one of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine's daughters, had been queen. This casket showing Becket's murder and entombment was first recorded in Naples in the 1700s, suggesting that it had been in the area for centuries, possibly even since the late 1100s.

About 1180–1220

Limoges, France

Copper-alloy, gilding, enamel

Lent by kind permission of the

Society of Antiquaries of London



The making of a saint

## 1, 2 Royal devotion beyond England

Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine's three daughters were pivotal to the spread of Becket's cult abroad. Their youngest daughter Joan married first King William II of Sicily, then Raymond VI Count of Toulouse, and both regions developed strong devotional ties to St Thomas. Her double seal declares her status as European royalty: **(left)** Queen Joan, daughter of the King of England and **(right)** Duchess of Narbonne, Countess of Toulouse and the Marchioness of Provence.

About 1196–9

France

Silver

British Museum

### Image caption:

The Bishop of Bath **(right)** gave Queen Margaret of Sicily **(left)**, mother of Joan's first husband William, this gold pendant containing fragments of Becket's blood-soaked clothes.

Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1961

## The making of a saint

### **The story retold**

Monastic historians were fascinated by Becket's defiance of Henry II and championed him as a defender of the freedom of the Church. Matthew Paris, a monk of St Albans Abbey, included an account of their dispute and the murder in his *Chronica Majora* (Major Chronicle). Paris also illustrated the gruesome event, showing Becket crossing his arms as he falls and Edward Grim leaping to his defence.

Matthew Paris, ***Chronica Majora*** (Major Chronicle)

About 1240–55

St Albans, England

Parchment

Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

The making of a saint

## **Becket's cult in Norway**

In Norway, Becket was second in popularity to St Olaf, the national saint. This golden reliquary decorated with dragons' heads was made in Bergen for Hedalen Stave Church, about 90 miles north of Oslo. The martyrdom on the lower panel is similar to several of the earliest known depictions from England. It shows the broken sword point and a fragment of Becket's skull falling to the floor. On the lid the Three Kings offer gifts to the infant Christ.

1220–50

Bergen, Norway

Copper-alloy, gilding, wooden core

Hedalen Stave Church

The making of a saint

**Right-hand label rail for the baptismal font  
opposite:**

**Henry implicated**

Around 20 years after Becket's death this baptismal font was made for the parish church of Lyngsjö in modern-day Sweden. Unusually, Henry II is depicted as the instigator of the murder. Identified on a scroll as '**Rex H[en]ricus**' (King Henry), he orders the knights to attack the archbishop. Becket became a popular saint in the region. A relic of St Thomas's was kept in a nearby church and local pilgrims journeyed to his tomb.

About 1191

Sweden

Stone

Lyngsjö Church, Sweden

**Image caption:**

Henry II orders the knights to attack Becket.

Image © Lyngsjö Church

The making of a saint

**Image caption:**

Becket falls towards the knights as he is killed, watched by Edward Grim.

Image © Lyngsjö Church

**Left-hand label rail**

**Image caption:**

Christ blesses the Apostle Thomas, who touches Christ's wound. A saint points at the scene.

Image © Lyngsjö Church

**Image caption:**

Christ sits between St Peter (holding a key) and a saint (holding a book).

Image © Lyngsjö Church

**Image caption:**

Christ crowns the Virgin Mary.

Image © Lyngsjö Church

**Image caption:**

An angel holds Christ's garment as he is baptised by John the Baptist.

Image © Lyngsjö Church

## The making of a saint

### **1–3 Becket's blood**

An unusual aspect of Becket's cult was a belief in the miraculous power of his blood. Many miracles in Benedict's collection involved consuming the archbishop's blood or placing a blood-soaked cloth over affected areas of the body.

Pilgrims bought intricate little flasks like these in Canterbury and the monks filled them with St Thomas's Water, Becket's diluted blood. It was consumed there and then or taken home to sick relatives. Found as far afield as Holland, France and Norway, they show the distances that pilgrims travelled to visit St Thomas's tomb.

**1** St Thomas praying in a boat

**2** St Thomas between two knights  
with raised swords

**3** St Thomas in an openwork frame.

The Latin around the rim reads:

'Thomas is the best doctor for the worthy sick.'

## The making of a saint

1200–1300

Canterbury, England

Lead-alloy

British Museum

### **Image caption:**

Stained glass in the Trinity Chapel at Canterbury Cathedral showing a monk giving pilgrims flasks and St Thomas's Water.

Image © The Chapter, Canterbury Cathedral

#### **4 Recording miraculous events**

Benedict, a monk and eyewitness to the murder, listened to Canterbury pilgrims and recorded their accounts of Becket's miracles. By the end of 1173 he had compiled over 270 astonishing stories. This early manuscript of Benedict's collection, open at the prologue, describes people's sadness following Becket's death. It begins: 'After the most blessed martyr of Christ, Thomas, rested from his labours ... our dancing was turned into mourning and our organ into the voice of those who weep.'

About 1180–1220

Canterbury, England

Parchment

Trinity College Cambridge



The making of a saint

## **5 Glorifying St Thomas**

On 7 July 1220 Becket's body was moved with great ceremony to a new shrine in the cathedral's Trinity Chapel. Called the translation, this ritual event was masterminded by Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket's martyrdom is shown in miniature detail on Langton's seal, with the tiny sword point and skull fragment falling to the floor. The Latin reads: 'May the death portrayed without be for you a life of love within.'

Confirmation of a grant issued by Stephen Langton  
as Archbishop of Canterbury

About 1213–15

England

Parchment, wax

Property of the Queen's Most Excellent Majesty in Right of  
Her Duchy of Lancaster. On loan from The National Archives

### **Image caption:**

Detail of Archbishop Stephen Langton's seal

Image © Reproduced by permission of the Chancellor and  
Council of the Duchy of Lancaster

The making of a saint

## **6 A new service for St Thomas**

Becket's translation ceremony of 1220 was a glorious spectacle attended by the boy-king Henry III of England and representatives of the European elite. No expense was spared for the celebrations. Canterbury's fountains flowed with wine and the feasting lasted for days. This manuscript contains a new liturgy or script for the holy service composed by Stephen Langton, shown here with three figures attending to Becket's body.

The Stowe Breviary  
About 1322–5  
Norwich, England  
Parchment  
The British Library

### **Image caption:**

A detail showing Archbishop Stephen Langton blessing the body of St Thomas.

Image © British Library Board

## The Miracle Windows

**In the decades following Becket's death, much of Canterbury Cathedral was rebuilt. A new chapel for his shrine was its crowning glory.**

On 5 September 1174 a fire ripped through Canterbury Cathedral's east end, prompting a colossal rebuilding project. The finest masons and artists took nearly fifty years to complete the work. Its centrepiece was Becket's golden shrine in a chapel decorated with stained glass, polished stone columns and a mosaic pavement.

Around the shrine twelve six-metre tall windows brought Becket's miracles to life. Most of the glass was made in the early 1200s, but there has been loss, repair and reordering over the centuries. The stories depicted in the windows show the myriad ways that St Thomas intervened in ordinary people's lives.

The making of a saint

**Image caption:**

The Miracle Windows in the Trinity Chapel. On the right a candle marks the site of Becket's shrine.

Image © The Chapter, Canterbury Cathedral

**Wall quote:**

In the place where Thomas suffered ...  
and where he was buried at last, the palsied are  
cured, the blind see, the deaf hear, the dumb  
speak, the lepers are cleansed, the possessed  
of a devil are freed ... I should not have dreamt  
of writing such words ... had not my eyes been  
witness to the certainty of this.

John of Salisbury, Becket's clerk and biographer, 1171

The making of a saint

## **Miracle Windows**

Twelve six-metre tall windows around Becket's golden shrine in the Trinity Chapel brought his miracles to life. Most of the glass was made in the early 1200s, but there has been loss, repair and reordering over time. This window is the fifth in the series. Recent research has revealed that for centuries panels 2 and 14 were incorrectly placed. They have been swapped for this display.

### **Image Caption:**

**Left:** the new arrangement of the fifth Miracle Window

Image © The Chapter, Canterbury Cathedral

## The making of a saint

### **1–3 A case of leprosy cured**

In panel **1** Ralph de Longeville sits next to Becket's tomb suffering from leprosy. His legs, covered in sores, are bathed with St Thomas's Water and he is offered some to drink. Panel **2** shows Ralph cured of his leprosy leaving Canterbury on horseback. In panel **3** he has returned to the tomb. He bends forward and opens his hands in thanks.

### **4, 6 A painful stomach healed**

Panel **4** shows Goditha of Hayes, who has dropsy, approaching the city gates holding her painful, swollen stomach. The panel showing Goditha being healed is lost. In Panel **6**, her swelling gone, she leaves with her companion.

### **5 Gifting Becket's clothing**

This scene shows a servant of the Canterbury monks giving an item of Becket's blood-splattered clothing to a poor man. It was originally in a neighbouring window and was moved here in the 1660s.

The making of a saint

### **7–8 Sick with fever**

Panels **7** and **8** tell the story of Etheldreda, a woman from Canterbury with a fever. Panel **7** shows her visiting Becket's tomb dressed in white and green. In panel **8** a monk mixes St Thomas's Water in a bowl, which he gives her to drink.

### **9 An offering of thanks**

Although it looks like the final scene from Etheldreda's story, panel **9** shows a woman called Saxeva. She gives thanks at Becket's tomb, cured of a painful arm and stomach ache. At the centre she offers a coiled wax candle called a trindle.

**7, 8** and **9** are not the original medieval panels. They were copied from nearby scenes to replace lost glass in 1857.

## The making of a saint

### **10–12 Becket appears to two sisters**

In panel **10** two sisters from Boxley in Kent approach the gates of a city on crutches. Panel **11** shows Becket, on the left dressed in red, appearing to one sister in a vision telling her she will be healed. The other sister prays at the tomb. The following night she too receives a vision from Becket, shown in panel **12**, and is also cured.



### **13–18 Condemned to a terrible fate**

Six panels tell the sensational story of Eilward of Westoning, a peasant accused of stealing in a drunken quarrel. In panel **13** he stands with the stolen items tied behind his back. A judge in a cap sentences him to trial by ordeal. Eilward fails and is condemned to blinding and castration. Panel **14** shows him reclining in bed, his head bandaged from a blow. Becket appears to him in a vision, emerging from a shrine to bless him.

In panel **15** Eilward lies bound under a plank and receives his grisly punishment. A man holds him by the neck and stabs his eyes. Another, wielding a blade, kneels on his legs and reaches for his testicles. Panel **16** shows Becket appearing in a vision to Eilward, who lies in bed. The saint makes the sign of the cross in front of his face. On waking, Eilward's eyes and testicles grow back. To show his gratitude he makes a journey to Canterbury Cathedral, sharing the story of his miraculous healing along the way. In panel **17** crowds gather round Eilward.

## The making of a saint

He points to his eyes while another man points at his groin. The green tree symbolises his restored fertility. Panel **18** shows Eilward giving thanks at Becket's tomb.

The making of a saint

### **19–21 A bloody nose**

Panels **19**, **20** and **21** tell the story of a monk called Hugh who fell ill at Jervaulx Abbey in Yorkshire. In panel **19** Hugh is in bed. A doctor in a white cap offers him medicine, which fails to cure him. In panel **20**, another monk offers St Thomas's Water to Hugh instead.

Panel **21** shows how the Water caused a violent nosebleed, after which his health is restored.

### **22 Giving thanks to Becket**

The final part of Hugh's miracle, now lost, was replaced in 1857 with a copy of a nearby scene. It shows the knight William of Dene, who was paralysed but regained the use of his legs, giving thanks at Becket's tomb.

Miracle Window NIII

Early 1200s and 1857

Canterbury, England

Glass, lead

Lent by the Chapter, Canterbury Cathedral

The making of a saint

**Wall quote:**

...we grant to God and confirm by this our present charter for ourselves and our heirs in perpetuity that the English Church is to be free and to have its rights fully and all its liberties unimpeded.

First clause of Magna Carta, 1225

The making of a saint

## **Magna Carta (1225)**

First sealed at Runnymede in 1215, **Magna Carta** (Great Charter) became a cornerstone of English law. Through this document rebel barons sought to curtail the power of King John. It covers practical matters from fishing rights to inheritance, but its first clause relates to the freedom of the Church. Probably added at the insistence of Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, this clause states that the English Church must be free from royal interference. It shows how Becket's dispute with Henry II continued to shape English politics long after his death.

When John died in 1216 the charter was resurrected by the council of his nine-year old son, Henry III. It was reissued that year, in 1217 and 1225 (shown here, one of only four surviving copies), and each served as a declaration of the king's commitment to good government.

## The making of a saint

Although some of the text was altered in the reissues, the clause regarding Church freedom remained. Langton, who was devoted to Becket and orchestrated his translation ceremony, was closely involved in the 1215 and 1225 versions.

1225

London, England

Parchment, wax, silk

Property of the Queen's Most Excellent Majesty in Right of Her Duchy of Lancaster. On loan from The National Archives

### **Image caption:**

A detail of Henry III's Great Seal from another 1225 Magna Carta in Durham.

Image © Chapter of Durham Cathedral

# Pilgrimage and devotion

**1220–1538**

**Becket was one of medieval Europe's most popular saints. His shrine was visited by hundreds of thousands of devoted pilgrims.**

Over the centuries St Thomas's popularity grew. He was the focus of intense devotion and the story of his murder continued to capture the imagination.

Alongside Jerusalem, Rome and Santiago de Compostela, Canterbury was one of the most visited pilgrimage destinations in Europe and the Holy Land. From Iceland to Italy, pilgrims travelled to show their devotion and pray at Becket's shrine.

The journey to Canterbury from London was made famous by poet Geoffrey Chaucer in **The Canterbury Tales**, written in the late 1300s. Chaucer tells of a bawdy group of pilgrims 'from every shire's end' who seek the 'holy blissful martyr'.

## Pilgrimage and devotion

### **Map caption:**

Major pilgrimage sites in medieval Europe and the Holy Land



### **1–3 Sculpting Becket's image**

In England there were more parish churches dedicated to St Thomas than to any other saint. His image featured in stained glass, wall paintings and sculpture, across the country and also abroad.

English carvers produced alabaster panels depicting his life and death, many of which were exported to the Continent.

Panels **1** and **2** are from the same altarpiece. They show Becket meeting Pope Alexander III in Sens and greeted by supporters on his return from exile. Panel **3** was part of a different altarpiece. Becket kneels in prayer. Four knights approach and two drive their swords into his head. Edward Grim watches the scene unfold.

1425–50

The Midlands, England

Alabaster

**1, 2** Victoria and Albert Museum

Given by Dr W. L. Hildburgh FSA

**3** British Museum

### **A rare piece of Becket's shrine**

Although the golden casket which held Becket's relics has long since disappeared, a few stone fragments from the carved marble base survive. This one was found in 1984 in the River Stour in Canterbury. The rare rose-pink marble, probably from Belgium, was used for the architectural details and floor around Becket's shrine in the cathedral's Trinity Chapel.

1184–1220

Canterbury, England

Marble

Canterbury Museums and Galleries

### **The shrine reconstructed**

Becket's shrine was completed in 1220. It took the form of a bejewelled golden casket on a carved marble base. The casket was covered by a box which could be raised on special occasions to reveal its hidden splendour. During Henry VIII's reign the shrine was destroyed. This reconstruction, drawing on surviving fragments and contemporary descriptions, shows how it might have looked around 1408.

In this film pilgrims worship St Thomas at the shrine. In front of the altar a monk attends to three people who give offerings. On either side pilgrims kneel and pray. Becket's miracle stories are explained to a group standing in front of the stained-glass windows. Behind the shrine a monk points out gems attached to the casket and names the donors.

Duration: about 1 minute

This film has no sound.

## Pilgrimage and devotion

Created by the Centre for the Study of Christianity & Culture (CSCC), University of York

Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council

© CSCC (2018)

Pilgrimage and devotion

**Floor plan caption:**

Floor plan of Canterbury Cathedral

**Wall quote:**

It is so richly adorned with pearls and precious stones that one would think there is no richer shrine in all Christendom.

Gabriel Tetzl of Nuremberg, 1466

## **A book belonging to Becket?**

Starting with ‘Blessed is the man who hath not walked in the counsel of the ungodly’, this book of psalms was memorised and recited in devotion. An inscription added in the 1500s records that it belonged to St Thomas. For a long time this claim was dismissed until a match was recently found in a Canterbury Cathedral inventory from the 1300s. No earlier evidence links the book to Becket, but it was one of many objects kept in the cathedral during the Middle Ages that were thought to have been owned by him.

About AD 980–1020

Canterbury, England

Parchment

Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

**Image caption:**

Inscription added in the 1500s: 'This psalter, covered with silver plates and ornamented with jewels, once belonged to N. Archbishop of Canterbury and finally came into the possession of Thomas Becket, once Archbishop of Canterbury, as is testified in an old document.'

Image © Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge

## Chaucer and pilgrimage

**Becket left his mark on the cultural landscape, inspiring works such as Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.**

In **The Canterbury Tales** Geoffrey Chaucer imagines a group of pilgrims on a spring trip to Becket's shrine. They include a Yeoman, Merchant, Shipman and Pardoner. Chaucer's description of their dress, manners and social position brings the world of medieval pilgrimage vividly to life.

The poem begins with a prologue, set at the Tabard Inn in Southwark on the banks of the Thames, where the characters spend the night before setting off for Canterbury. To pass the time on their journey the pilgrims tell a series of tales, in a contest set by the innkeeper.



Pilgrimage and devotion

## **Chaucer's pilgrims**

One of the earliest attempts to collect Chaucer's poetry into a single anthology, this illustrated manuscript includes **The Canterbury Tales**.

Here the Wife of Bath, one of his most memorable characters, sits on a horse carrying a whip. Married five times, she was an intrepid pilgrim who had visited Jerusalem, Rome, Santiago de Compostela and Cologne.

1400–25

England

Parchment

The Syndics of Cambridge University Library

## The Yeoman

Chaucer's Yeoman, the Knight's assistant, wears 'a Cristofre on his brest of silver shene' (a Christopher of bright silver on his chest).

St Christopher, the patron saint of travellers, was typically shown carrying the infant Christ on his back. Like the Yeoman, the owner of this brooch of St Christopher probably wore it for protection on journeys.

Brooch

1400—1500

England

Silver, gilding

British Museum

### **Image caption:**

The Yeoman from **The Canterbury Tales** published by William Caxton in 1483

Image © British Library Board

## **The Merchant**

St Thomas, the patron saint of English merchants trading in the Low Countries, is shown here on their company seal matrix standing in a boat on a calm sea. Chaucer's Merchant traded abroad and carried foreign coinage. His expensive clothes included a 'Flaudryssh bever hat' (Flemish beaver hat).

Seal matrix

About 1462

England

Copper-alloy

British Museum

### **Image caption:**

The Merchant from **The Canterbury Tales** published by William Caxton in 1483

Image © British Library Board

## **The Shipman**

Chaucer's Shipman was so accomplished that 'of his lodemenage, Ther nas noon swich from Hulle to Cartage' (of his navigation skills, no-one from Hull to Carthage was his match). He would have been familiar with scientific instruments such as astrolabes, which calculated the position of stars in relation to the horizon. Made in 1326, this is the earliest dated European astrolabe.

Astrolabe

1326

England

Copper-alloy

British Museum

### **Image caption:**

The Shipman from **The Canterbury Tales**  
published by William Caxton in 1483

Image © British Library Board

## **1–24 Souvenirs from Canterbury**

Chaucer's Pardoner wore a badge to mark his pilgrimage to Rome. After visiting Becket's shrine real pilgrims bought similar souvenirs, badges to pin to clothing or little flasks worn around the neck. They were made quickly and cheaply by pouring molten lead or tin into a mould. The range of Canterbury souvenirs is remarkable, from miniature bells inscribed with 'St Thomas' to tiny swords with detachable scabbards. They transmitted some of the healing power and status of the holy site back to pilgrims' communities.

1200–1400

England

Mould: stone

Souvenirs: lead-alloy, tin-alloy

British Museum

## Pilgrimage and devotion

- 1 Fragment of a flask showing the martyrdom
- 2 Barrel-shaped flask showing the martyrdom
- 3 St Thomas standing and enthroned. The inscription translates as: 'Reginald FitzUrse brought to pass the martyrdom of Thomas'
- 4 Casket-shaped flask showing the martyrdom
- 5 Barrel-shaped flask showing the martyrdom
- 6 Becket returning from exile on horseback
- 7 Badge mould for making images of Becket on horseback
- 8 Bust of St Thomas in an architectural frame
- 9 St Thomas enthroned in a t-shaped frame
- 10 Bust of St Thomas in a star
- 11 Bust of St Thomas between two swords
- 12 St Thomas standing
- 13 St Thomas riding a peacock

## Pilgrimage and devotion

- 14** Fragment of the boat in which Becket returned from exile
- 15** Bust of St Thomas
- 16** Bust of St Thomas inscribed 'Thomas'
- 17** Fragment of St Thomas's shrine
- 18** Scabbard of the murder weapon with Reginald FitzUrse's arms
- 19** Detachable sword and scabbard
- 20** Canterbury bell inscribed 'Thomas'
- 21** St Thomas's gloves
- 22** A framed letter 't'
- 23** The letter 't' in a four-leaf clover
- 24** Medallion with an inscription translating as: 'Saint Thomas pray for me'

Pilgrimage and devotion

**Image caption:**

Pilgrims wearing badges in a detail from  
**The Seven Works of Mercy** by the  
Master of Alkmaar, 1504

Image © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



## **25, 26 Becket in gold**

Becket's image also featured on more expensive items like this diamond ring and enamelled pendant.

The martyrdom is engraved in miniature detail on the ring (**25**). He stands alone before an altar, his head impaled by a sword. The Virgin and infant Christ are shown on the other side.

St Thomas and John the Baptist are depicted on either side of the reliquary pendant (**26**). Becket stands between two white flowers. An inscription under John the Baptist reads '**A mon + derreyne**' (at my end).

**25** Ring  
Gold, diamond

**26** Pendant  
Gold, enamel

1400–1500  
England  
British Museum

## Pilgrimage and devotion

### **Image caption:**

Detail of Becket's martyrdom on the ring

### **Royal devotion**

St Thomas was popular with English kings and queens, from Henry II to Henry VIII. Most visited his shrine more than once, giving gifts such as statues made of gold and silver. During his first decades on the throne, Henry VIII was devoted to the saint and made the pilgrimage to Canterbury at least five times. These two objects connected to Henry and Queen Katherine of Aragon show Becket's continued high status at court.

## **A gift from the king**

Henry VIII may have commissioned this deluxe surgical instrument case as a gift for the royal surgeon Thomas Vicary. Unusually, Becket is shown being stabbed in the back by two knights with spears, as a figure leaps behind the altar for safety. The lid features St George, one of England's most popular saints, fighting the dragon.

About 1520–30

England

Silver, gilding, enamel, wooden core, leather

The Worshipful Company of Barbers

### **Image caption:**

Henry VIII's royal arms are prominent on the front of the instrument case.

Image © The Worshipful Company of Barbers

### **An ivory cup belonging to Becket**

Katherine of Aragon, Queen of England and Henry VIII's first wife, was a devoted Roman Catholic. In 1513 she was given an ivory bowl reportedly owned by Becket and had it set into this spectacular cup. The gilded-silver mounts are decorated with pearls, gems and her personal emblem, the pomegranate. A mitre and the letters 'TB' are engraved on the side, perhaps a reference to Becket.

Ivory bowl: possibly 1100–1200; mounts: 1525–6

London, England

Ivory, silver-gilt, gold, gems, pearl

Victoria and Albert Museum. Given by Lord Wakefield, through The Art Fund

### **ArtFund**

# Becket and the Tudors

**1538–1603**

**Under Henry VIII, Becket's shrine was destroyed. His cult was banned, to the shock of people across the country and throughout Europe.**

On 5 September 1538, Henry VIII arrived in Canterbury. During his three-day stay royal agents began demolishing St Thomas's shrine, prising off the jewels and smashing the marble base. They packed up its precious metal in crates, which were taken to London. Becket's bones were removed, and a rumour spread that they had been burnt and the ashes scattered to the wind.

Part of a series of unexpected attacks on St Thomas's cult, it was soon followed by a royal order to outlaw his name and image across the country. With this act Becket was stripped of his sainthood in England.

## Becket and the Tudors

### **A family divided**

Henry VIII and his children are shown in this Protestant print united by lineage but divided by religion. On the right Edward VI kneels before his father and Elizabeth I stands with figures representing Plenty and Peace. Mary I and her husband Philip II of Spain are isolated on the left, pursued by Mars, god of war. Edward and Elizabeth were committed religious reformers who continued to attack Becket's cult during their reigns. Mary, a Roman Catholic, reversed her father's changes.

William Rogers after Lucas de Heere, **Henry VIII Enthroned with Successor**

1595–1600

England

Engraving

British Museum

## **Reformation and destruction**

**St Thomas was singled out by religious reformers, who saw him as a dangerous rebel rather than a saint.**

Becket's shrine was destroyed at a time of momentous change in Europe. Radical movements for religious reform were gathering support and challenged the pope's authority. Some groups condemned pilgrimages and the veneration of saints.

Henry VIII, originally the pope's ally, embraced reform when it suited his political needs. In 1534 the king broke with Rome, and Parliament appointed him Supreme Head of the Church of England. Henry VIII and his council could not tolerate Becket's status as a defender of Church liberty and denounced him as a traitor.

## **Cutting out the saint**

The new laws condemning St Thomas's veneration included an order for his name to be 'erased and put out of all the books'. In this book of hours the devotional prayer to Becket has been carefully cut out, while the martyrdom on the left is undamaged. The owner, reluctant to remove Becket completely, may have wanted to preserve the beautiful image.

About 1475

Southern Netherlands

Parchment

The British Library



## Becket and the Tudors

### **Becket's legend obscured**

**The Golden Legend**, a compendium of the lives of saints, was one of the most popular books of the Middle Ages. In this copy the text and image for Becket's story have been crossed out with black ink. Despite the superficial damage, both remain legible.

Jacobus de Voragine, **The Golden Legend**, printed by  
Wynkyn de Worde

1521

London, England

Printed book

Lent by the Governors of Stonyhurst College

### **A prayer obliterated**

Thick red ink has been selectively smeared across prayers to St Thomas in this manuscript containing texts for the celebration of mass throughout the year. It was owned by the parish church of St John the Baptist in Bromsgrove, near Worcester.

Around 1450

England

Parchment

The Syndics of Cambridge University Library

## Becket and the Tudors

### **Wall quote:**

...from henceforth the said Thomas Becket shall not be esteemed, named, reputed, nor called a saint, but Bishop Becket, and ... his images and pictures through the whole realm shall be put down...

Royal proclamation, 16 November 1538

### **Saved from destruction**

A rare survivor, this alabaster sculpture of four knights attacking Becket was removed from a church to protect it from damage. The heraldic shields at its base commemorate the marriage of Sir Godfrey Foljambe (blue with scallop shells) and Avena Ireland (red with **fleur de lis**). The couple commissioned it in the 1300s, possibly for Beauchief Abbey in Derbyshire, which was dedicated to St Thomas.

1350–75

The Midlands, England

Alabaster

Private collection

## **Martyrdom and memory**

**Becket's murder continued to resonate in the 1500s, as those who opposed the Crown were executed and proclaimed martyrs.**

Religious reform under Henry VIII divided the country and vocal opponents lost their lives.

The execution of former chancellor Thomas More in 1535 was seen by his supporters as a martyrdom echoing Becket's.

Henry's daughter Queen Mary I returned England to the Roman Catholic Church and persecuted leading reformers, including Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury. Cranmer would be revered as a martyr under Queen Elizabeth I. During her reign it became increasingly dangerous to practise Catholicism and many people fled to the Continent.

## Becket and the Tudors

### **Image caption:**

Durante Alberti, **The Martyrs' Picture**, 1581.  
St Thomas kneels on the left.

Reproduced by kind permission of the Rector of the  
Venerable English College, Rome

## Becket and the Tudors

### **In Becket's footsteps**

St Thomas (**left**) and St Edmund (**right**) kneel before the Trinity. This engraving is a copy of a painting in the Venerable English College in Rome.

It was the centrepiece of a cycle depicting the history of martyrdom in the British Isles that included More, Fisher and others recently executed. The College trained priests for a special mission, the reconversion of England to Catholicism, and promoted Becket as a model for emulation.

After Durante Alberti, **The Martyrs' Picture** from G.B. Cavalieri, **Ecclesiae Anglicanae Trophaea** (The Trophies of the English Church)

1584

Rome, Italy

Engraving

British Museum

### **Image caption:**

Becket's martyrdom from **The Trophies of the English Church**

## **1, 2 Collecting More's relics**

After Thomas More's execution, objects associated with him were treasured by his relatives as relics. This pendant (1) and crucifix (2), from a group known as the More Jewels, have traditionally been thought to be his personal possessions. A Greek inscription on the crucifix records that it was made to hold a relic of St Thomas the Apostle.

St George is on one side of the pendant and Christ as the Man of Sorrows on the other. Despised and rejected by political authority before his crucifixion, this image is a fitting analogy to More's end.

**1** Pendant. The Latin inscription reads: 'Oh you who have suffered worse things, to these things he [God] will also give an end.'

About 1520–35

Possibly England

Gold, enamel

Lent by the British Jesuit Province

**2** Crucifix

About 1520–30

Possibly England

Gold, niello, pearl

Lent by the Governors of Stonyhurst College

### **3 Mirroring martyrdom**

#### **Thomas More and Thomas Becket**

'The king's good servant but God's first.'

Thomas More spoke these words at his execution on 6 July 1535, the eve of the translation feast of St Thomas's relics. An internationally renowned scholar, More was for many years a trusted ally of Henry VIII. Like Becket he served as chancellor and lost his life for opposing the king. This pendant, with an image of More on one side and Becket on the other, shows how their martyrdoms came to be compared.

1600–1700

Possibly England

Silver

British Museum

#### **Image caption:**

St Thomas of Canterbury is shown on the other side of the pendant.

### Wall label:

#### **New English martyrs**

Cardinal John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, was executed on 22 June 1535, just two weeks before Thomas More. They are shown together in this devotional engraving, named as martyrs. Like More, Fisher opposed Henry VIII's religious reform. After the cardinal's execution, the pope wrote to King Francis I of France stating that Fisher had died for an even greater cause than Becket's: 'the truth of the universal church'.

About 1550–1600

Holland

Engraving

British Museum



## **Thomas Cranmer burnt at the stake**

Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, was one of Henry VIII's right-hand men and a leading church reformer. With the king's new chancellor, Thomas Cromwell, he was a key figure in the planned eradication of Becket's cult. Cranmer's fortunes changed when Mary I came to the throne and he was arrested and put on trial for heresy. This woodcut, from a popular compendium of Protestant martyrs, shows him being seized from a podium and then burnt at the stake on 21 March 1556.

John Foxe, **Actes and Monuments** (Book of Martyrs)  
1563  
England  
Woodcut  
British Museum

# St Thomas an enduring saint

**Becket's memory was kept alive through the devotion of Catholics and those seeking a model of opposition to unbridled power.**

With his shrine in ruins and his cult outlawed, Becket's future looked bleak. But Catholics continued to worship him secretly at home and openly on the Continent. People fleeing religious persecution under the Tudors smuggled relics abroad to protect them, including several believed to be of St Thomas.

To this day Becket divides opinion. For some he remains a martyr and a saint, for others a traitor and a villain. Either way his is a remarkable life, the story of Thomas of London born in Cheapside, who defied a king and paid the ultimate price.

## St Thomas: an enduring saint

### **A rare relic**

A Latin inscription around the rim of this small oval reliquary reads: '**Ex cranio St Thomae Cantuariensis**' (from St Thomas of Canterbury's skull). Wrapped in red velvet and secured with golden thread, this is one of the few surviving relics associated with Becket. It was probably smuggled out of England by a Catholic in the last decades of the 1500s, at great personal risk.

Reliquary

About 1666

Liège, Belgium

Silver, gilding, glass, copper-alloy, velvet, silk

Lent by the British Jesuit Province

St Thomas: an enduring saint

### **A new commission**

St Thomas stands with a sword wedged deeply in his head and one arm raised defiantly in blessing. This statue was made to hold the smaller reliquary on the left, which was fixed into the two holes in his breast. Commissioned for the English Jesuit College of St Omers, the ensemble was probably carried in religious processions and is still used today at Stonyhurst College in Lancashire.

Henri de Flémalle

1666

Liège, Belgium

Silver

Lent by the British Jesuit Province

St Thomas: an enduring saint



Scan this QR code or visit  
[britishmuseum.org/becket-content](http://britishmuseum.org/becket-content) to hear:

### **William Byrd, Deus Venerunt Gentes, 1581–9**

Byrd, an English Catholic, composed this piece to commemorate the execution in 1581 of the Jesuit priest Edmund Campion. The Latin text, taken from the Psalms, describes the suffering of God's people.

Duration: about 3 minutes

Performed by The Sixteen conducted by Harry Christophers  
© and © The Sixteen Productions Ltd  
William Byrd edited by Edmund H. Fellowes  
© Stainer & Bell Ltd

St Thomas: an enduring saint

**Wall quote:**

Clear the air! clean the sky! wash the wind!  
take the stone from the stone, take the skin  
from the arm, take the muscle from the bone,  
and wash them. Wash the stone, wash the bone,  
wash the brain, wash the soul, wash them  
wash them!

T.S. Eliot, **Murder in the Cathedral**, 1935

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