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The road to Canterbury: Why St Thomas Becket still fascinates 850 years after his murder



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This July was meant to have seen the return to Canterbury of a major relic: the blood-splattered tunicle (shirt) reputedly worn by Archbishop Thomas Becket at his murder. It would have been a fitting way to mark the 800th anniversary of the “Translation” of Becket’s bones from the crypt to a magnificent shrine in the cathedral, which took place on July 7 1220.

Encased in a 17th-century glass reliquary, and loaned to Canterbury from the papal church of Santa Maria Maggiore, this 12th-century relic was to have been a focal point of this summer’s planned events to commemorate “Becket 2020”: as well as the anniversary of the Translation, this year we will mark the 850th anniversary of Becker’s martyrdom, after vespers on December 29 1170.

The double anniversary would have been a landmark in the enduring 800-year tradition of paying homage at the site where Becket was infamously murdered, with half the crown of his head cut off by a sword blow. Becket’s murder – at the hands of four

reportedly intoxicated knights, in full armour, claiming to be carrying out the wishes of Henry II – changed the course of history, and the events leading up to the killing remain one of the most debated episodes of the Middle Ages. Becket has had devotees but also enemies – such as Henry VIII, who destroyed Becket's bones and the famous shrine which had done more than anything to spread Becket's cult.

But why does the Christian world remain so obsessed with Becket? How did it come about that Britain's foremost celebrity saint is a man who was only ordained as a priest in June 1162, just two months before being consecrated as Archbishop, after being better known for his lavish entertaining, falconry skills, wardrobe of fur coats and having his own pet wolf?

In October, the British Museum will – pandemic permitting – host a landmark exhibition, Thomas Becket, devoted to his life, martyrdom and enduring legacy. What's clear is that the 800 years of popular mythologizing (much of it apocryphal) has only helped his cause with Anglicans, Catholics, Hollywood and even New Age faith types. "His story has all the hallmarks of a Game of Thrones plot," says Naomi Speakman, co-curator of the exhibition. "There's drama, fame, royalty, power, envy, retribution, and ultimately a brutal murder that shocked Europe. These events have repercussions that have echoed throughout time."

Until Covid-19 put the sword to much of the Becket 2020 anniversary programme, there were at least 50 other events and talks, led by Canterbury Cathedral, planned for this summer and autumn around the country. These were to include: a new October production of TS Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*; a talk on "The Two Thomases" by the Dean of Hereford Cathedral; the Annual Thomas Becket Lecture by Lord Rowan Williams; a "Becket Celebrity Healer" exhibition in Canterbury; a pilgrim badge exhibition at the Museum of London; and a three day conference, "Thomas Becket: Life, Death and Legacy", co-hosted by the University of Kent.

In order to understand the Becket cult, and why he is often described as a "universal" saint, it helps to remember his origins. He was born in London, the son of a middle-class draper: a relatively humble start, which has helped people relate to him. His career break was to get an early legal training in the curia of Theobald, archbishop of Canterbury, before studying law (and pleasure) in Bologna. He soon rose to being Henry II's glamorous warrior chancellor – but when Theobald died, Henry decided that the Chancellor would be a suitable primate of the English Church.

At this point, in a well-known twist, Becket resigns as Chancellor and "converts" to a new ascetic life, scourging himself and devoting hours to prayer. He starts wearing a

hair shirt, abandons his worldly ways and then defies his former close royal friend by putting canon law above regal authority.

Despite being from lowly middle-class stock, he stands against Henry II's insistence on the Church's submission to the Constitutions of Clarendon – which Henry referred to as “ancient customs” but which really meant Caesar before God, royal laws before papal bulls, licenses or decrees.

That Becket stood unflinchingly firm, to the point of tactlessness – he could, for instance, have locked the cathedral doors when the knights arrived – also helps explain his popular appeal. Like Simon de Montfort, who led the Baron's Revolt, his standing up to royal tyranny marks him as a popular rebel hero as much as a martyr.

But unlike de Montfort, a French aristocrat, Becket came from London-born middle-class stock. His social rise puts him in the same royal court “outsider club” as Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, the son of a butcher. (Sir Thomas More was too well born to be a member). England has always been a country of surprising social mobility, so long as you have – like Shakespeare – the right patron, education, brains and ambition. In the Middle Ages, the stage for advancement was the court, and Becket was a master of court politics and diplomacy.

Devotion to Becket has flourished ever since his death: within a decade, ten biographies had appeared, and hundreds of miracles were attributed to his intercession. In the 20th century, Becket's cult has been boosted by TS Eliot, whose *Murder in the Cathedral* was first performed at the Canterbury Festival of 1935, and the French playwright Jean Anouilh, whose 1959 play *Becket or The Honour of God* portrays the saint as a closet homosexual. This interpretation was picked up by the 1964 film adaption of Anouilh's play, starring Peter O' Toole as Henry II and Richard Burton as Becket.

But as the historian John Guy observes in his 2012 biography, there is not a scintilla of evidence to suggest that Becket was a repressed homosexual – although this theory has helped the Becket myth. Becket's enemies used everything they could to discredit him – his protection, for instance, of a priest accused of murder – but they never made such a claim. Indeed, Anouilh made many basic errors, such as claiming that Becket was Saxon when he was first-generation Norman.

Most of the contemporary biographies were hagiographies, of course, but several included gripping and graphic eye-witness accounts of his murder, most notably that of the monk Edward Grim. He happened to be attending vespers at the time the knights strode in, apparently fortified by wine, with Reginald Fitz Urse shouting: “Where is Thomas Becket, traitor to the king?” Becket replied: “I am no traitor to the king but a

priest.”

When the knights charged at Becket, Grim bravely tried to protect him and nearly lost an arm. Another blow “shattered” a sword on the stone, causing sparks to fly. When Becket’s head was sliced off, “the blood turned white from the brain yet no less did the brain turn red from the blood”. Soon after the murderers’ departure, the monks collected the blood and brains and placed them into a silver basin. Already, their relic value was clear.

Becket’s bloodied vestments – including the tunic that was meant to be returned this July – were sold to the poor. It wasn’t long before miracles were reported around Canterbury and a petition was being made to the Pope for Becket’s speedy canonization. It took just two years, with the case made that although he may not have always lived like a monk, let alone a saint, he died as a true martyr. In his last gasping words, Becket declared his allegiance to God and “the Church’s cause”.

By Easter 1171, pilgrims began to flow towards Canterbury to visit his burial site in the crypt. Henry II – no stranger to brazen hypocrisy – soon realized that (partly in order to defuse the political problem of two popes) he needed to embrace the Becket cult. He wasted no time in punishing the four murderous knights, and became an avid Becket follower – literally. He went on around 10 pilgrimages himself from London to Canterbury as a form of penance, including a road trip with King Louis of France. Indeed, England’s medieval kings, until Henry VIII, adopted Becket for their divine-right cause. Crucially, they advanced the Becket cult by establishing Canterbury as the heart of English pilgrimage.

Soon the flow of money-spending pilgrims were to make Canterbury more popular than Compostela, Assisi or Chartres. The tourism and hospitality industry along the pilgrims’ way from Southwark Cathedral to Canterbury, via Rochester along Watling Street, also boomed. People sold Becket holy water to pilgrim badges, churches commissioned murals and stained glass windows, and abbeys were dedicated to Becket – such as Lesnes Abbey, whose ruins and former monks’ garden are now a public park in Bexley where locals in tight-fitting lycra lift weights, exercise and eat ice creams from the café.

There was only one problem. The new saint’s feast day was December 29, the middle of winter. This was far from ideal for the pilgrim trade. It was a condition of Becket’s canonization that a new magnificent shrine (in the cathedral itself) should be built for St Thomas of Canterbury. It took a while due to a serious fire, lack of funds, and the original French architect nearly killing himself after falling off a ladder.

To mark the 50th anniversary of his death, the magnificent new tomb was finally ready to be dedicated (and opened to the public) on July 7 1220 with an imperious ceremony attended by all the senior bishops, a papal legate, the archbishop of Rheims, barons and the 12-year-old Henry III, who was considered too young to carry the lead box of bones to their new resting place in the new Trinity Chapel.

Crucially, moving the relics of St Thomas also came with the brilliant idea of creating a new midsummer (ie holiday season) feast day to mark the “Translation” – July 7th. This soon became a much more popular date for pilgrimage than December 29. As Hilaire Belloc explained in his book *The Old Road*, in which he tramped through the December snow to follow the old route of the Becket pilgrims, the “flush of summer” became “the new and more convenient day upon which Canterbury was most sought.” For convenient, read “profitable”.

Soon, helped by kings such as Henry V visiting Becket’s shrine after Agincourt and Caxton’s printing of the *Canterbury Tales*, pilgrims from all over Europe were to make the journey to Canterbury more popular (and less expensive) than The Holy Land. Only Rome remained more popular. Above all, it was the act of pilgrimage – a festive journey in soi-disant “penance” whilst enjoying oneself – that created the cult of Becket, along with Henry’s famously misquoted line “Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?” (Becket scholars now agree that this is not what he said. His words are more likely to have been what Grim reports: “What miserable traitors have I promoted in my realm, who let their lord be treated with such contempt by a low-born clerk!”)

Of course there was always going to be a backlash. I still have my copy of the *Oxford Dictionary of Saints* that my parents gave me for my Confirmation in June 1979. The entry for Becket – probably the longest – refers to how Erasmus came to later attack the cult of St Thomas, and how Henry VIII – who regarded Becket as a heretic in the manner of Thomas More – banned the much-loved pilgrimage. He also “prohibited and defaced” all images of Thomas of Canterbury, and ordered all mention of England’s most popular medieval saint to be removed from liturgical books.

But such attempts did little to stop Becket’s cult growing, even after the Reformation. At least 80 churches in England have been dedicated to him. No village or town misses any opportunity to promote tourism (and sell pilgrim badges) with any local Becket associations.

This remains true today, as I found out when I walked the first part of the so-called “Becket Way” from Southwark Cathedral into Kent, a relatively new pilgrimage route from Southwark to Canterbury created by Leigh Hatts and endorsed by the British

Pilgrimage Trust. It starts out in Southwark at the blue plaque sign to mark the (now demolished) famous Tabard Inn where Chaucer’s pilgrims set off out of London.

Even today, there are still many buildings, streets, churches and pubs that form part of the Becket cult. You walk past a block of council flats called Becket House and a road called Pilgrim Street. Halfway along the Old Kent Road I passed the old Becket pub, where the boxer Henry Cooper used to train in a gym above. As a symbol of Becket’s endurance, it still has its old pub sign hanging up, depicting a stained-glass-style image of England’s most famous priest. Alas, it has now been taken over by the Viet Quan restaurant, offering a 20 per cent Happy Hour discount. A miracle is certainly needed to make it a worthy stopping-place for a 21st-century pilgrim.

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