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Module code: HPMS7006 Module title: Thomas Becket	Student ID number: 2017656	Educational support needs: ~~Yes~~/No
Module tutor: Janet Burton Assignment due date: 7th May 2023		
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An analysis of John of Salisbury's *Vita Thomae*

This analysis will consider the *Vita et Passio Sancti Thomae Martyris*, an account of St. Thomas Becket's life and death written by the English intellectual John of Salisbury (c.1120-1180), a man described as 'perhaps the leading proponent of Becket's sanctity'.[1] It will consider who John was, his relationship with Thomas, and his reasons for writing the *Vita*. In doing so it will assess both the value and limitations of the text as an historical source.

John of Salisbury was a cleric born c.1120 to a 'modest' family in Old Sarum (modern-day Salisbury) who rose to become Bishop of Chartres, and whose first recorded encounter with Thomas Becket was in 1148.[2] Educated in and connected to the highest intellectual circles, John is most well-known for his philosophical treatises, the *Metalogicon* and the *Policraticus*.[3] Although the author of another short *Vita* (that of St. Anselm, probably written at the request of Thomas), the majority of his work was not hagiographical in nature, and the *Vita Thomae* has been criticised for its brevity and 'self-plagiarism', dismissed as 'superficial' and a 'disappointment'.[4] Even when credited with significance it is described as an 'odd duck', and Rachel Koopmans concludes that John is 'not much of a hagiographer'.[5] As we shall see, such characterisations tend to do the *Vita* a disservice by viewing it in comparison with both the

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[1] Karen Bollermann and Cary J. Nederman, 'John of Salisbury and Thomas Becket', in *A Companion to John of Salisbury*, eds. Christophe Grellard and Frederique Lachaud (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 63-104, (p. 94).

[2] On John's background and upbringing see Christophe Grellard and Frederique Lachaud, 'Introduction', in *A Companion to John of Salisbury*, eds. Christophe Grellard and Frederique Lachaud (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 1-28, (p. 2). John's precise year of birth is unknown but is usually placed between 1115 and 1120. John records his first meeting with Thomas at the Council of Reims in 1148 in *The 'Historia Pontificalis' of John of Salisbury*, ed. M. Chibnall (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986).

[3] Both texts have been viewed as critiques of Thomas, as has the poetic work *Entheticus maior*. On this see Bollermann and Nederman, 'John of Salisbury and Thomas Becket', p. 66, p. 70.

[4] Ibid., p.81. Michael Staunton, *The Lives of Thomas Becket* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 4, p. 7. The accusation of 'self-plagiarism' relates to the incorporation of John's earlier letter, *Ex insperato* (no. 305).

[5] Bollermann and Nederman, 'John of Salisbury and Thomas Becket', p. 87. Rachel Koopmans, *Wonderful to Relate: Miracle Stories and Miracle Collecting in High Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 124.

other *Vitae* and John's longer works; a study of the text in its own right and judged against its own intentions allows for a greater appreciation of its merits.[6]

It is not universally agreed that John was an eyewitness to Thomas' murder, but this analysis assumes that he was, hidden but able to see the events.[7] In this case John's *Vita*, most likely written early in 1171, represents one of the earliest eyewitness accounts of Thomas' life and death, providing a brief survey of his early life and career before focusing on his time as Archbishop of Canterbury and the martyrdom.[8] It has been criticised on the basis that it repeats John's earlier letter, *Ex insperato* (letter 305), but in fact the letter (in edited form) constitutes only thirty percent of the text, and its inclusion provides the *Vita* with an extremely early and dramatic account of the martyrdom (although *Ex insperato*'s dating is itself contested).[9] There would be inherent value in this proximity of event to record even if John did not also have the advantage of knowing Thomas well, and moving in the same Canterbury circle. In attributing significance to the fact that John knew Thomas, however, one must attempt to understand as clearly as possible what their relationship was. Ronald E. Pepin's claim that the two were 'fast friends' is unlikely to have been the case.[10] Although both were employed by Archbishop

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[6] For Staunton's argument that the *Vita* is a disappointment when compared with John's other work, see Michael Staunton, *Thomas Becket and His Biographers* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), p. 19.

[7] William Fitzstephen, writing in 1173-4, states that John '*relicto ipso, petiverunt alii altaria, alii latibula'* ('abandoned the archbishop, or made for the altar, or other hiding places), William Fitzstephen, 'Vita Sancti Thomae', in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket V. III*, ed. J. G. Robertson, (London: Kraus Reprint Ltd., 1965), pp. 1-147, (p. 139); the translation is Staunton's, *The Lives*, p. 200. Bollermann and Nederman come down on the side of John's not being present, 'John of Salisbury and Thomas Becket', p. 82, while Ronald E. Pepin assumes that he was hiding behind an altar with a view of the events, Ronald E. Pepin, 'John of Salisbury as a Writer', *A Companion to John of Salisbury*, eds. Christophe Grellard and Frederique Lachaud (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 147-179, (p. 169).

[8] Grellard and Lachaud describe John's *Vita* as 'the first hagiographic account of the martyr', 'Introduction', p. 12, but in the same collection of essays Bollermann and Nederman put the *Vita* later, c. late 1172-1173, 'John of Salisbury and Thomas Becket', p. 85. It is more usually credited as being early (see Staunton, *Becket and His Biographers*, p. 4, and Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket* (London: Orion Books Ltd., 1997), p. 4.

[9] Bollermann and Nederman, 'John of Salisbury and Thomas Becket', p. 86. For Bollermann and Nederman's interesting but unlikely dating of *Ex insperato* to between October 1171 and April 1172 see pp. 83-4. This analysis assumes, as most historians do, that it was written earlier, in fact very soon after the murder.

[10] Ronald E. Pepin, *Anselm & Becket: Two Canterbury Saints' Lives by John of Salisbury* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2009), p. 1. See 'John of Salisbury and Thomas Becket', p. 64 for Bollermann and Nederman's caution against Pepin's view, and their discussion of the conclusions of other historians on the nature of the relationship between the two.

Theobald, John spent much of his time on missions to the papal *Curia*, and whilst he was in France for most of Thomas' six-year exile, the two were not in the same place. John clearly did not have the same intimate connection with and physical proximity to Thomas as, for example, Herbert of Boshum, but nevertheless he was closer to Thomas than many of the biographers.[11]

The work of postmodern historians such as Hayden White has radically altered the way we approach primary source texts such as the *Vita*. Distinguishing between events (what actually happened) and history (what has been recorded or written about what happened) forces an acknowledgement that what is presented by an author as 'fact' is unavoidably interpretative, a *constructed* arrangement of pieces of information ('facts') into a 'highly selective' narrative sequence.[12] Even had John of Salisbury had no purpose in writing other than to record the events as he knew them, his account would have been coloured by his own opinions and experiences. Such subjectivity is naturally more overt in hagiographical works, but this does not devalue the *Vita*. Whilst it must be approached as subjective, constructed narrative rather than historical truth, John's *Vita* remains a work written very close in time to the life of the man it describes, by someone who was well acquainted with both Thomas himself (the positives and the negatives), and the political and religious contexts behind his martyrdom.

John was in fact transparent about his purpose in writing, stating that he intended to 'set forth the reason for martyrdom'.[13] In retrospect it is easy to see Thomas' canonisation as a

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[11] Herbert's distress at finally being parted from Thomas before the martyrdom is apparent in his own *Vita*, written significantly later (1184-6), as he talks of leaving Thomas '*in multo ejulato, emanantibus lacrymis*' ('in great sorrow, with tears pouring forth'), convinced that he would never see Thomas again, Herbert of Bosham, 'Vita Sancti Thomae', in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket V. III*, ed. J. G. Robertson (London: Kraus Reprint Ltd., 1965), pp. 155-553, (p. 486); the translation is Staunton's, *The Lives*, p. 194.

[12] Hayden White, *The Practical Past* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014), pp.xiii. For White's early work on constructivism and the subjective nature of history see in particular Hayden White, 'The Burden of History', *History and Theory* 5(2) (1966), pp. 111-134. For a useful introduction to the idea see Keith Jenkins *Re-thinking History* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991).

[13] John of Salisbury, 'Vita Sancti Thomae', in *Anselm & Becket: Two Canterbury Saints' Lives by John of Salisbury*, trans. R. E. Pepin (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2009), p. 76.

foregone conclusion, but the ongoing reliance of Alexander III on an (at this point) 'unrepentant' Henry II, and concerns over Thomas' actions and character meant that there was a genuine need for persuasion, for a compelling case to be made on Thomas' behalf.[14] John also wrote that he was deliberately producing a 'concise and quite brief' work.[15] As previously discussed, the *Vita* has been dismissed on account of its length, but its brevity serves its purpose well; John's intent was to provide the 'sum' of Thomas' life as opposed to the 'whole sequence of his deeds'.[16] In its desire to present Thomas as a candidate worthy of sainthood (a title John already allocates to him) the hagiographical text naturally dwells on Thomas' positive qualities and, considered cynically, a brief survey of a life makes it easier to leave out inconvenient details.[17] Whilst his flaws are not entirely ignored, John describing his 'youthful inclination' and courting of the 'popular breeze', the comparison of Thomas with St. Brice (also a feature of several other *Vitae)* represents an attempt to explain away his earlier behaviour (Staunton has also suggested that this need to justify Thomas' character and actions is one of the reasons for the proliferation of *Lives* written in such short order).[18] John's acknowledgement of Thomas as flawed does not necessarily sit easily within a hagiographical narrative, but given the openly critical tone of some of his earlier letters (both to and about Thomas) the *Vita* could not

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[14] Staunton, *Becket and His Biographers*, p. 21. As the writer of a very early *Vita* John's motivation differs in part from that of later biographers. The establishment of sanctity, often a core motivator for the writer of a life, did not apply in the same way to later biographers given the speed with which Becket's canonisation occurred, Staunton, *Becket and His Biographers*, p. 11. In John's *Ex insperato* (and thus also the *Vita*) Staunton argues we come closest to a 'dossier' submitted to support Thomas' canonisation, *Becket and His Biographers*, p. 20, p. 25.

[15] John of Salisbury, 'Vita', p. 74.

[16] Ibid., p. 74.

[17] John's confident use of 'Saint Thomas' represents a significant development from letter 305, in which he seeks advice on whether it is safe to refer to Thomas as a saint, '*Superest itaque ut nostram parvitatem vestra instruat eruditio, an citra Romani pontificis auctoritatem tutum sit in missarum solemnnis et aliis publicis orationibus eum in catalogo martyrum tanquam salutis praesidem invocare*' ('And so for one of your learning to instruct our humble selves as to whether it would be safe to invoke him as a guardian of salvation among the lists of the martyrs in the solemnities of Masses and in other public prayers without the authority of the Roman Pontiff'), John of Salisbury, 'letter 305', *Joannis Saresberiensis Postea Epizcopi Carnotensis Opera Omnia, V. II* (Apud J. H. Parker, 1848), the translation is John Francis O'Connor's, *An Annotated Translation of the Letters of John of Salisbury* (Unpublished Masters Thesis, Loyola University, 1947), p. 97.

[18] John of Salisbury, 'Vita', p. 75. St Brice was similarly accused of overly worldly behaviour, but subsequently transformed himself. On the number of Lives being linked to a need to explain Thomas' life and actions see Staunton, *Becket and His Biographers*, p. 13.

reasonably have excluded all criticism.[19] John's attempt to reconcile his previous, well-documented disapproval of Thomas with a man whose canonisation he is now promoting creates a core tension within the *Vita*.[20]

In common with several of the other biographers, John deals with the contradictory aspects of Thomas' character and behaviour by depicting him as undergoing a transformation when he became archbishop, 'immediately' adopting a hair shirt and 'crucifying his flesh', and by repeatedly distinguishing between external and internal appearances ('he carefully concealed the soldier of Christ').[21] The richness of the archepiscopal table is justified by its provision of leftovers for the poor, his household may be 'opulent', but such 'trappings' were 'despised' by Thomas himself.[22] John also attempts to position Thomas as a man whose sanctity is justified not only by the manner of his death and the posthumous miracles attributed to him, but also by the daily battles he fought whilst alive, the 'enemies…threats…countless vexations and injuries' which made him a 'living victim'.[23] In this the *Vita* illustrates how hagiographical texts worked to form collective opinions of a saint (often a prime motivation for their authors).[24] The criticisms of Thomas found in John's letters, of his opulent lifestyle, immoderation, tendency to act without consultation, and subservience to Henry II whilst chancellor are minimised, replaced by a picture of a man whose life was beset by struggles, who tormented

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[19] John's letters, particularly those from the late 1150s, openly 'admonish' Thomas for his disobedience to Theobald and in fact suggest 'considerable alienation' between Canterbury and Thomas, Bollermann and Nederman, 'John of Salisbury and Thomas Becket', pp. 69-70. See also p. 88 on the contrast between John's letters and the *Vita*. For Anne Duggan's persuasive argument that John tailored the tone and content of his letters to the context in which they were written as part of a balancing act, see Anne Duggan, 'John of Salisbury and Thomas Becket', in *The World of John of Salisbury*, ed. M. Wilks (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), pp. 427-38, (p. 429).

[20] Bollermann and Nederman, 'John of Salisbury and Thomas Becket', p. 87.

[21] John of Salisbury, 'Vita', p. 79.

[22] Ibid., p. 80.

[23] Ibid., p. 83, p. 91.

[24] On the idea of collective memory and the ability of narrative to both form and modify it, see Renata Brosch, 'Thomas Cromwell, Our Contemporary: The Poetics of Subjective Experience as Intersubjective Ethics in *Wolf Hall*', in *The Return of the Historical Novel?: Thinking About Fiction and History After Historiographic Metafiction*, eds. A. J. Johnston & K. Wiegandt (Germany: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2017), pp. 167-8.

his flesh, and went even further than his holy predecessor in providing for the poor.[25] In common with several other biographers, Thomas is discussed in Christ-like terms: John emphasises the *imitatio Christi* aspects of the murder, at points suggesting that what Thomas experienced was worse than that which Christ himself suffered.[26] As Grellard and Lachaud argue, John's narrative 'contributed to the inscription of the martyrdom in collective memory', spreading a curated version of Thomas' life and death.[27]

To some extent, however, the holiness or otherwise of Thomas' life was a side-issue for John, something to be worked around in relation to making a convincing argument for sainthood, but subsidiary to Thomas' (in John's eyes) principal role as a defender of the Church. The *Vita* demonstrates that for all the ambiguity of John's earlier feelings towards Thomas, once he determined that Henry II would continue to pursue a course which aimed at restricting the powers of the Church (and realised that his own chances of returning to royal favour were slim) his commitment to Thomas became 'total'.[28] Ultimately Thomas' death suited John as a vehicle for his most strongly held tenet, that of the paramount importance of ecclesiastical liberty; the *Vita* is in part an expression of this view and a powerful indicator of the importance of the issue to a leading intellectual of the twelfth century.[29]

Prior to his martyrdom perhaps few of Thomas' contemporaries would have characterised his life as saintly, but John's *Vita* works with the other biographies to paint just such a picture, to

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[25] John of Salisbury, 'Vita', p. 80.

[26] Ibid., p. 91. On the near sacrilege of John's comparisons of Thomas with Christ see Bollermann and Nederman, 'John of Salisbury and Thomas Becket', pp. 90-1.

[27] Grellard and Lachaud, 'Introduction', p. 12.

[28] See Grellard and Lachaud, 'Introduction', p. 12 for a useful discussion of the reasons behind this pivot. Bollermann and Nederman follow John McLoughlin in dating this 'decisive change' c. mid-1166 following a meeting with Henry, 'John of Salisbury and Thomas Becket, pp. 78-9. Duggan, 'John of Salisbury and Thomas Becket', p. 428. On John's realisation that he would not be reconciled with Henry see ibid., p. 432.

[29] This conclusion is shared by Bollermann and Nederman who argue that Thomas became 'a very useful saint for promoting the ecclesiastical agenda dear to John's heart', 'John of Salisbury and Thomas Becket', p. 64, p. 104.

convince people that not only his death in the cause of ecclesiastical liberty but also the manner of his life was worthy of sainthood. Despite its limitations (its subjective nature and brevity), the *Vita* is a hugely important source on Thomas' life, death, and canonisation. Circulating widely, the *Vita* disseminated Thomas' cult and advanced the cause of his application for canonisation. In addition to providing vital historical detail and insight into both Thomas himself (his life and death) and the society in which he lived, it shaped and continues to shape the way in which succeeding generations view Thomas Becket.

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