

PILGRIMAGE IN THE MIDDLE AGES
A READER

edited by

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marble statue, standing as though in labor, how several of them, miserably trodden underfoot [but then] lifted by the pious assistance of men above the heads of the crowd, marched forward as though upon a pavement; and how many others, gasping with their last breath, panted in the cloisters of the brethren to the despair of everyone. Moreover the brethren who were showing the tokens of the passion of our Lord to the visitors had to yield to their anger and rioting and many a time, having no place to turn, escaped with the relics through the windows. When I was instructed by the brethren as a schoolboy I used to hear of this; in my youth I deplored it from without; in my mature years I zealously strove to have it corrected. But when it pleased him who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, to place insignificant me, although my merits were against it, at the head of the important administration of this sacred church; then, impelled to a correction of the aforesaid inconvenience only by the ineffable mercy of almighty God and by the aid of the holy martyrs our patron saints, we resolved to hasten with all our soul and all the affection of our mind, to the enlargement of the aforesaid place – we who would never have presumed to set our hand to it, not even to think of it, had not so great, so necessary, so useful and honorable an occasion demanded it.

How does Suger describe the original church built at St-Denis? How does he portray the basilica during the days when crowds of pilgrims filled it, including, specifically, female visitors? What led him to commission the architectural changes to the church? Based on this description, would the dangerous crowds of pilgrims probably have encouraged or discouraged pilgrims from visiting St-Denis?

51. MIRACLES AT THE SHRINE OF THOMAS BECKET

On 29 December 1170, after years of contention with the English ruler Henry II, Archbishop Thomas Becket of Canterbury was murdered by four of the king's knights in the cathedral church at Canterbury. Becket's remains immediately began to attract pilgrims and visitors seeking the healing power of the saint. Becket, canonized in 1173, emerged as one of the most popular saints in medieval England, where his shrine became a pilgrimage destination of unrivaled popularity. The selections below describe

a number of healing miracles from the year 1171, recorded by Benedict of Canterbury, the first of several monks to memorialize the saint's deeds.

Source: trans. J. Shinnars, in *Medieval Popular Religion 1000–1500*, ed. J. Shinnars, 2nd ed. (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2007), pp. 165–70, from J.C. Robertson, *Miracles for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, Roll Series 67 (London: Longman & Co., 1870), vol. 2, pp. 61–69, 74.

2.7. Edilda, a woman from Canterbury, was left at the shrine, carried with the help of three women. It had now been about a year and half since she could stand on her foot. During that whole time she had lived as if on the brink of death, confined to bed. The disease was especially severe in her left knee, which through the contraction of the muscles prevented her from walking. Her knee reeled with pain if the woman happened to touch it even lightly with her hand. She was carried to the martyr by three women, as we said, and propped on a staff; she returned home with her pain relieved. In witness of her recovered health, before us all with her upraised fist she struck her knee a hard blow, which since the second year of her illness she could not touch because of the pain. The people saw her walking about and praised the Lord; they were filled with wonder and amazed over what had happened to her. But we refrain from discussing why she remained lame and did not regain complete health, considering it more prudent to keep totally silent about God's secret judgments than to draw rash conclusions from them.

2.8. But we know that he who strengthened that woman's weak knee was capable of making her feet and soles completely firm so that she could have walked normally, just as we have no doubt that he did grant this to Wlryva, a woman from Canterbury. Satan had bound her for three years already, and she was bent over, unable to walk anywhere without a crutch. She fell down before the saint for a short prayer and, with the pain gone from her loins, she rose standing straight up without her crutch, wanting no longer to carry the thing that had once supported her.

2.9. Edmund, a young man born in Canterbury and well known there, brought himself to the shrine guided by one eye alone: he had only the appearance of a left eye for it had no power of vision. On his left side he also had something growing inside that seemed congealed and very heavy which, shifting up and down, had tormented him for nearly two years causing him unbelievable stabs of pain and amazing torture. It was pushing him toward death, which was apparent just by his pale and withered look. A drop of [Becket's] most holy blood was put in his eye, and he drank an infusion: the blood and water. Miraculous power of that drink! Going a good distance

away from the tomb, he threw himself down on his face; he turned himself on his side and began thrashing around and screaming; he kept getting up but could not stand because of his weakened gait. He sank down on his face dashing it against the stone, and it seemed as if he had come there only to his harm. He whom divine power was healing you would have thought insane. Finally he collapsed into sleep. He lay on his back sleeping. The saint of God stood next to him while he slept and, grabbing him by the shoulder, shook him and said, "Get up, go on." He instantly awoke and felt that the shifting thing that had been twisting inside him was being forced up to the bottom of his throat. Nearly choking, he threw his hand to his throat, wanting to feel what it was. Then instantly, as if some small inner sack had burst, by some divine power it was expelled from his mouth. It seemed to him to have the taste of bitter gall. Immediately he got up, threw down his cloak, and proceeded to the martyr's tomb to give thanks. Having received a complete cure of his eye and his body, through love of the martyr he took the cross [vowed] that he would go to Jerusalem, and all the people who saw it praised God.

2.10. We realize that what happened to a woman named Muriel deserved no less praise or glory. Debilitated by a grave illness for two years or more, she thought that only the remedy of death would put an end to her suffering. When her husband realized the things that God's martyr was gloriously doing, he offered his sick wife a drink of that health-giving drink [Becket's blood mixed with water]. She drank it, and by degrees over the course of three days began to suffer more than usual from weakness. By the third day she had weakened to the point of death, so much so that she was taken out of her bed lest, contrary to the custom of the Christian religion, she die lying on a comfortable feather bed. A priest was summoned with the greatest haste to administer extreme unction to her. But she suddenly was nauseous and vomited up what was making her sick; for that whole day at regular intervals she did not stop vomiting. It was discovered that she was spitting up an enormous number of cherry stones, plum pits, and acorns – cooled in the woman's stomach, some of them had even sprouted! Some of these were shown to us, which left us awestruck both that the woman had carried the pits of these fruits in her stomach for such a long time and that the pits could germinate there. There can be no doubt that they would have hastened her death if the draft of that holy liquid had not come to her aid. Thus the woman was cured, snatched, as it were, from the very jaws of death. And though, as we said, she was so incapacitated that she had been unable to set foot out of her house for more than two years, the next day, through the strength bestowed on her by God, she went on foot to the martyr. And all the people rejoiced together at the things he had gloriously done.

2.11. The Lord added another miracle to this one, though for a less serious illness. (Why do I say less serious? The sickness someone endures never seems small.) We knew a certain lady named Ethelburga, full of good works and charity, who had suffered for many days from a serious gout in her left arm and shoulder. Deprived of the use of her left arm, she arranged to have a candle made to the measure of the arm's length in honor of the martyr. You should have seen how the martyr responded to the woman through the action of grace, because the Lord promised to those turning to him, "Before you can call me, I will say to you, 'Look, here I am.'" For she had scarcely begun to measure her arm with a thread than she announced that she felt all the pain receding. And so she had the candle made, offered it to the martyr, and regained full health.

2.12. Robert, a blacksmith from the Isle of Thanet, also found the grace of healing, but the vision that preceded the gift of his cure is no less wonderful. He had been blind for at least two years; the loss of his livelihood troubled him more than his lost sight. But then, after our venerable father had been called home from exile, around the time when he was called to heaven from the exile of this world [29 December], this man heard this oracle in a dream: "Go, Robert, to Christ Church Canterbury; a monk will put milk in your eyes and you will recover your sight." But at first he thought he was deluded; he neither believed the promise nor obeyed the command. Yet later, when he heard that God's saint practically glittered with miracles, he recalled what he had heard and, equating this sweetest lamb's innocent blood to milk's sweetness, he began to hope for a cure. With the guidance of his wife and daughter (for we understand they accompanied him), he arrived where he had been ordered to go. After daubing his eyes with the longed-for blood of the martyr, he prostrated himself in prayer. While facedown, he felt his head racked by what seemed like a loud thunderclap and he regained his sight. Getting up, he publicly preached God's grace.

2.13. But what is easier: to restore health to the body or the mind? He who restored sight to physical eyes restored sanity to the young man, Henry of Fordwich. He had been insane for some days and had accidentally wounded his friends due to his pain. With his hands bound behind him, he was dragged to the saint. He was presented to the saint even though he was struggling and shouting. He remained there insane for the whole day, but as the light of the sun waned, he started gradually to recover the light of reason. He spent the night in the church and went back home in the morning completely recovered.

2.14. We received a woman from the vicinity of the same town who not only could not hear but was also troubled by an unbearable pain in the head. That universal medicine of the sick – water mixed with the blood – was

poured into her stopped ears; she was also given some to drink, and then she threw herself into prayer. While she prayed she suffered more bitterly than before and she thought [she heard] many twigs being snapped in pieces inside her head. She asked those standing around whether they heard the noise in her head. But while she was being racked this way, she cried out to the Lord and he heard her. For as she shouted, a great deal of matter flowed out of her ears, as if some inner abscess had ruptured. The matter was followed by blood, and the blood by the gift of her lost hearing.

2.15. Ellward, a man from Tenham, for some years had lost the pleasures of the sense of smell and could smell absolutely nothing. He entered that place where rests that good odor of the anointed one, that sweet victim, that scented tree, whose aroma the whole world now senses; but before he had reached that fragrant flower of England, there came to him the sweetest perfume filling his nostrils, and he rejoiced to recover his sense of smell.

2.16. We think that it should not be forgotten that, while many people obtained a longed-for healing, one person was denied outright. For the holy father [Becket] came to a crippled boy who had gone seeking a favor from the martyr and had fallen asleep with his head resting on top of the tomb. "Why are you lying on me?" he asked. "You certainly will not be healed. Go away. I'll do nothing for you." These words woke him up and he told us and his mother what he had heard with great sadness of heart. Convinced by the adamancy of the [saint's] words, he had himself taken elsewhere. Still, we urged him to press on with his prayers, and he agreed; but time passed and he did not regain his health....

2.18. With regard to these other cures, it first occurs to us to speak about what Agnes, a Canterbury woman, gained from the Water of Saint Thomas – for this is what the people of the surrounding region called it: "Saint Thomas's Water," or "Canterbury Water." Thus, an uncontrollable pain seized this woman's face, and a horrible tumor disfigured it; her mouth, twisted on one side, betrayed the shape of nature corrupted. An excess of phlegm constantly and copiously flowing from her mouth caused her much embarrassment without any relief from the pain or the tumor. At last the inner part of her face became infected, with the result that it was necessary for the woman to have milk instead of solid food. Since she was unable to eat food, she sustained herself with little sips of liquid. But for the last three days she had stopped drinking even these since she was so squeezed by pain. You would not have endured the stink that issued from her putrefying face. Into her fifth week of pain, the woman was thirsty and drank some of the saint's water. O miraculous water, which quenched not only the thirst but the pain of its drinker! O miraculous water, which quenched not only the pain but shrunk the tumor! I am about to tell you something astonishing.

A basin used to be put to the woman's mouth to catch the phlegm. Lying prone with her mouth open, the woman was being coaxed to take care of the phlegm running out of her mouth. But when she lay back down after a swallow of water, from her mouth appeared the rather large head of a worm shaped like a red-hot coal, one and half inches long with a tail like a very sharp awl and crawling on four feet. By its speed it showed such tenacity that some said it had come from the Enemy [the Devil]. It was drowned in the bowl of phlegm, so it was thought, but when [the bowl was] put up to an upper window, it was not visible. Thus the patient's pain ceased and in a brief time her swollen face returned to its normal state....

2.24. What are we to say about Saxeya of Dover? Did not her joy wane as her pain waxed? From Christmas to Easter she continually experienced what the opposite of health is through a cramp in her bowels and a pain in her arm. A mental pain afflicted her as much as her physical suffering, for she was unable to work but ashamed to beg. Her spirit grew weary of life. She fled to the martyr, prayed to him, and slept. The martyr revealed his presence to the sleeper. "Rise," he said, "offer your candle." Leaping up, she discovered herself cured. She obeyed his order and showed herself so healthy and agile that she said with exaggeration that she was strong enough to fly.

What sort of people came to the shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury? Where did they come from? What kind of problems were they experiencing? How does Benedict of Canterbury try to convince his readers of the saint's miraculous powers? Did pilgrims seeking cures at the shrine always get what they prayed for? What do the descriptions of illness given in this account indicate about the level of medical knowledge possessed by the monks who celebrated Saint Thomas's miracles?

52. THE MARVELS OF ROME

Writing in the early thirteenth century, the English cleric and university master Gregorius, who had apparently traveled to Rome on ecclesiastical business, composed a description of the city's noteworthy sites and attractions. Rather than focusing on Rome's Christian pilgrimage sites, he showed an uncommon interest in the city's classical structures and "pagan" landscape, demonstrating that Rome's appeal to travelers was not limited to saints' shrines and churches. Even Gregorius, however, did not ignore Rome's popularity among devotional travelers, commenting – with a sometimes cutting tone – on the presence of pilgrims in the city.

Source: trans. J. Osborne, in *Master Gregorius: The Marvels of Rome* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1987), pp. 17–35.