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Module code: HPMS7006 Module title: Thomas Becket	Student ID number: 2005762	Educational support needs: No
Module tutor: Prof. Janet Burton		
Assignment due date: 13/12/21		
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"This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things and heard and wrote these things."

A Critique of Herbert of Bosham's Life of Thomas Becket.

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Herbert of Bosham's *Life of Thomas Becket* was the last *Life* to have been composed by anyone who knew Thomas well. Written between 1184 and 1186 whilst Herbert was in self-imposed exile at the Cistercian Abbey of Ourscamp, it is also the longest *Life*, containing lengthy passages of theological discourse in addition to historical narrative. Clearly anticipating that readers would find these tedious, he begged towards the end of his book that his work should not be abridged. Barely twenty years later it was included in the *Quadriologus* in an abridged form, which has been the version most widely known since.¹ In its original, unabridged, form it exists in only two manuscripts – one in Arras (with some detached folios in Lambeth Palace) and a slightly later copy in Corpus Christi College Oxford.²

Born c.1120, Herbert trained in Paris under Peter Lombard, becoming an accomplished theologian before serving Henry II as a clerk during Thomas's chancellorship and continuing in this role after Thomas became archbishop.³ Herbert acted as Thomas's divinity tutor, friend, confidant, adviser and, along with John of Salisbury, had a powerful influence on Thomas's intellectual development.⁴ He was by Thomas's side at all the major events of the exile, but was sent to France just before Thomas's death and so was not present at the martyrdom. However, his is the only biography to present a first-hand account of the exile and it is Herbert's long-standing intimacy with Thomas, his role in shaping Thomas's decisions and thinking, which makes this *Life* particularly important.⁵

Seen simply as a source of evidence for the life of Thomas Becket, Herbert's biography can be frustrating. Herbert's recollection of Thomas's activities during the exile is detailed, but there are clearly inaccuracies in some of the narrative details, one example being the muddled chronology of events surrounding the Conference at Gisors.⁶ The frequent long passages of impenetrable theological digression have irritated historians by interrupting and obscuring the narrative flow of events. Herbert

¹ Michael Staunton, *Thomas Becket and his Biographers* (London: Boydell Press, 2006) p.63

² Lambeth Palace Library, Database of Manuscripts and Archives, <https://archives.lambethpalacelibrary.org.uk/CalmView/Record.aspx?src=CalmView.Catalog&id=MS%2f5048&pos=1> [accessed 10/12/21]

³ Michael Staunton, *The Lives of Thomas Becket* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001) p.10

⁴ John Guy, *Thomas Becket*, (London, Penguin Books, 2012) p.xvi

⁵ Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket* (London: George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd, 1986) p.7

⁶ Staunton, *The Lives of Thomas Becket*, p.153

never claims, though, that his *Life* is a work of historical accuracy; in fact he makes it clear that this is not his prime concern. He recognises that some may think he applies himself '*more to theological edification than the historical articulation of the man's deeds, and in this way to smack too much of a theologian and too little of a historian*'.⁷ He justifies this by saying that the reader should '*look to me not only to explain the archbishop's deeds but the reason for them, not only what was done but the mind of the doer*'.⁸ Herbert sought to explain reasoning and thought processes rather than give a simple narrative of events, and the theological passages are an integral part of this process. Much of Herbert's language sits within the hagiographical tradition, but Herbert goes further – he was a theologian and he frames his *Life* as a work of theological exegesis first and foremost.

Throughout the *Life* Herbert styles himself as John, the most dearly loved of Christ's disciples, and identifies Thomas with the figure of Christ himself. In his account of the Council of Westminster he writes of himself '*This is the disciple who is bearing witness to these things and heard and wrote these things*'.⁹ These words mirror those at the end of the Gospel according to John and would have brought to mind the phrase which follows, '*We know that his testimony is true*'.¹⁰ Biblical references and parallels between the lives of Jesus and Thomas are scattered throughout the narrative. In a particularly striking parallel, the return of Thomas to England in 1170 is framed as the arrival of Christ in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the poor '*tearing off their garments and spreading them on the road, crying out again and again 'Blessed is he who come in the name of the Lord'.*' He even explicitly claims that Thomas was the Lord '*for the second time approaching his passion*'.¹¹ Thomas is variously described as the '*light of the world*', '*athlete of the Almighty*' and '*Christ's triumphant anointed*' – even by 12th century standards the degree of his adulation of Thomas was unusual. Since Thomas's reputation was already well established by the time Herbert wrote, he is unlikely to have felt any need to defend Thomas, but in the letter to Archbishop Baldwin which prefaces the *Life*, Herbert wrote that '*this man most certainly provides an example of a model, so that whatever he did, you ought to do the same.*' By placing Thomas within a Biblical framework he aims to justify both the man and the cause for which he fought.

Herbert's *Life* was written at least fourteen years after the events described and this presents its own problems to the historian. The inaccuracies in chronology probably resulted from a faded memory, whilst his recollection of past events was likely to have been distorted by viewing the past through the prism of Thomas's later sanctity. Even if Herbert still remembered the real-life Thomas, by 1184 the widespread knowledge of Thomas's sanctity would allow for nothing other than a sterilised, hagiographical version of his character. However, by waiting until 1184 Herbert could afford a degree of honesty not possible for earlier writers. By 1184 Henry was embroiled in struggles against his sons; reacting to another *Life* of Thomas was not going to be a priority for him at that time, especially when composed within territory

⁷ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and his Biographers*, p.71

⁸ *ibid*, p.71

⁹ *ibid* p.67

¹⁰ John 21 v.24

¹¹ Staunton, *The Lives of Thomas Becket*, p.184

of the King of France. Herbert speaks warmly of the French King, calling him '*The gentle King of France*' and '*the beloved boy*', whereas he refers to Henry and his court at Northampton as '*that day of battle when he fought the beasts*'.¹² Herbert shows no signs of restraint or fear in his attribution of blame; freedom which only distance in time and geography could give him.

Herbert was a zealot in the fight for the liberties of the Church. Throughout the text he praises Thomas for being unyielding and uncompromising and certainly influenced Thomas in this respect. At Northampton he advises excommunication, whilst his advice to Thomas at Montmirail to insist on retaining the clause '*saving God's honour*' was in many ways disastrous.¹³ Inevitably his passion for his cause created strong partisan bias in his writing and this resulted in some distortion of the narrative by exaggeration and by selective omission of events which are known from other sources. Examples of this include Herbert's report on the Council of Tours, where he passes over Thomas's quarrels with Roger of York and his failed attempt to have Anselm canonised. Similarly, Herbert presents the translation of Edward the Confessor as a time of peaceful agreement, when it was actually a time of discord.¹⁴ In passages describing Henry's motives and thought processes Herbert makes bold assumptions which may be based on reports relayed to him or may be mere supposition. These passages certainly need to be treated with extreme caution as Herbert, consciously or not, is likely to have used them to further his own agenda.

There are many times in Herbert's text when he reports long speeches by the major characters. Helpfully, he explains his own method. Styling himself as John the Evangelist, he writes '*if these were not the exact words said, these words written nevertheless express the spirit and substance (virtus et materia) of those spoken.*' The tradition of conveying the sense intended by a speech rather than the exact words was nothing new, having been discussed by classical authors and Augustine.¹⁵ Although they must be approached critically by the historian, Herbert's speeches offer a profound insight into what he saw as the spiritual and political motives and justification behind Thomas's actions.

Herbert of Bosham's *Life of Thomas Becket* is less a hagiographical account of a saint's life than a theological justification for a cause. Read even superficially, or in its abridged form, his *Life* is of great value as he was the only biographer to be able to relate a first-hand account of the exile. Herbert's privileged position certainly affords a profound insight into the political situation as it was viewed within the camp of Thomas and his supporters. However, the real value in his work lies within the long, difficult passages of theological exegesis. As Thomas's divinity tutor and adviser, the beliefs expressed in these passages and the way Herbert applies his understanding of Scripture to a situation are likely to have been in the mind of Thomas too. This is exactly what Herbert means when he claims that his aim is to

¹² *ibid*, p.121 and 168-9

¹³ Anne Duggan, *Reputations: Thomas Becket* (London: Arnold, 2004) p.92; John Guy, *Thomas Becket* (London, Penguin Books, 2013) p.xvi

¹⁴ Staunton, *The Lives of Thomas Becket*, p.70-75

¹⁵ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and his Biographers*, p.67

explain what is in '*the mind of the doer*.' Though his memory of events may have waned, Herbert's theological justification for his cause is less likely to have changed with the passage of time and gives us a glimpse of the influences at work on Thomas. Though Thomas is the focus of the biography, Herbert is equally passionate about his cause, the struggle to defend the liberties of the Church, and in many ways this work is the expression of his desire to pass on the baton to Thomas's successors in Canterbury.

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