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Assignment due date: 7 th April 2023		
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WILLIAM FITZSTEPHEN

Chris Dixon – December 2022

An unusually large number of people, mostly clerics or monks, were inspired to write biographies of Thomas Becket within twenty years of his murder in December 1170. Dr Michael Staunton estimates that at least fourteen biographies were written before the end of the twelfth century although at least two, including one written by a woman, are now lost.¹

Two biographers, both clerks of Becket, wrote lengthy, detailed and authoritative accounts relying frequently on their own personal experiences. These were Herbert of Bosham, whose work was not completed until 1184-6, and William Fitzstephen, whose biography was written about ten years earlier. This essay is an analysis of William Fitzstephen² and his work 'Vita Sancti Thomae' (The Life of Saint Thomas) which I shall hereinafter refer to as '*Vita*'.

¹ M.Staunton, *Thomas Becket and his Biographers*, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), p 1.

² There is some variation in the spelling of his surname in the sources. I have chosen to use the spelling used by Michael Staunton unless I am quoting from sources in which I use the spelling employed by the original source.

Who Was William Fitzstephen?

A mystery surrounds the identity of Fitzstephen. Most of what we know about this author is what he tells us himself in *Vita*.

However, he is mentioned in a history of the Priory of Christchurch (Canterbury):

About this time [1189] lived William Fitz Stephens, usually called Stephens or Stephanides, a monk of this church, descended from a noble family in Normandy. After spending most of his life in these cloysters [sic], he went over to France, where he grew famous for his knowledge of philosophy and divinity. He wrote much of St. Thomas, his miracles &c and the affairs of Henry II. ³

A genealogist, researching the ancestry of the Fitz Stephen family records that a Norman Lord, Airey Fitz Stephen born in 1036 in Normandy, was the captain of the ship which brought William, Duke of Normandy to Pevensey in 1066. His son was Thomas Fitz Stephen who was the captain of the ill-fated White Ship which foundered in 1120. Thomas Fitz Stephen had two grandsons, one of which, 'William Fitz Stephen', is described as:

William, who took holy orders, was a monk of the Benedictine Order at Canterbury Cathedral, a close friend of Thomas Becket, a judicial official in association with the great Archbishop, and eventually Chief Justice of the Circuit Court of England.⁴

³ E.Hastead, *The priory of Christchurch: Deans and Priors*, in *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent: Vol 11* (Canterbury, 1800), pp 425-460, British History Online, <<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-kent/vol11/pp425-60>>,[Accessed: 8th December 2022].

⁴ Stevens Genealogy, *Internet Archive*, <https://www.archive.org/stream/stevensgenealogy00stev/stevensgenealogy00stev_djvu.txt>,[Accessed: 8th December 2022].

William filius Stephani is listed as Sheriff of Gloucestershire from 1171 to 1189 (possibly 1186) initially together with his brother Ralph.⁵

Edward Foss is of the opinion that:

... there are many grounds for identifying the sheriff and justiciar with a remarkable man of the same name who flourished at the same period. I mean William Fitz-Stephen, the author of the Life and Passion of Archbishop Becket.⁶

He does admit, however, that 'I have no positive evidence to support the suggestion'.⁷

John Stow, in his Survey of London, records that 'Fitz-Stephens was born in London and died in 1191'.⁸ There is no other evidence that he was born in London unless one chooses to infer this from his own claim to be 'A Citizen of London'

It is surprising that none of the other contemporary biographers mentions Fitzstephen even though he was one of the actual witnesses to the murder. It has been suggested that he was possibly shunned after the murder because of his associations with the Royal Court.⁹

⁵ C.Elrlington, Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society 128 (2010), pp 207-227, <https://www.bgas.org.uk/tbgas_bg/v128/bg128207.pdf>, [Accessed: 8th December 2022].

⁶ E.Foss, *The Judges of England (Vol I)*, (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1848), pp 371-3.

⁷ Ibid. p371.

⁸ J.Stow, 'Appendix: Libellum de situ et nobilitate Londini', in *A Survey of London. Reprinted from the Text of 1603*, ed. C.L.Kingsford, (Oxford, 1908), pp. 218-229. *British History Online*, <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/survey-of-london-stow/1603/pp218-229>>, [Accessed 9th December 2022]

⁹ M.Staunton, *Thomas Becket and his Biographers*, p 57.

What we learn from the Fitzstephen himself is first described in the prologue to *Vita*:

I was the fellow-citizen of my lord, his chaplain and a member of his household, invited by him to share his cares. I was his recorder in chancery, in chapel when he celebrated Mass, I acted as sub-deacon. When he sat to hear disputes in court, I read out the letters and documents put forward and sometimes, at his command, I acted as advocate in certain cases. I was present with him at the council of Northampton where matters of great moment were debated. I was a witness of his passion at Canterbury, and many other things which are here written I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears; others I learned from those who were cognizant of them.¹⁰

Vita is a substantial biographical work based to a large extent on Fitzstephen's own first-hand knowledge. The work is highly regarded for its 'appeal to the modern reader', for his 'eye for detail' and 'highly informative and graphically evocative descriptions'.¹¹ This compares with the biography of Herbert Bosham which has been described as 'tedious and wearisome'.¹² Staunton quotes the editor of *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, James Robertson, who introduces the complete Bosham by saying:

Herbert is, indeed, one of the most provoking of authors. Instead of being content to tell an intelligible story, ... he continually digresses into long

¹⁰ G.Greenaway (translator and editor), *The Life and Death of THOMAS BECKET based on the account of William fitzStephen his clerk*, (London: The Folio Society, 1961), p 35.

¹¹ M.Staunton, *Thomas Becket and his Biographers*, p.56.

¹² L.T.Gourd, *An Annotated Translation of the Life of St. Thomas Becket by William Fitz Stephen*, <https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1621&context=luc_theses>, [Accessed 9th December 2022]

discourses which are quite beside the subject, and in themselves are mere nothingness.¹³

Frank Barlow describes it as 'garrulous, sometimes tedious'.¹⁴

In considering if any of these criticisms apply also to Fitzstephen's work, it is necessary to determine the extent to which *Vita* is a biography, a hagiography, a history, a narrative and a work of literature.

Vita as a biography

Apart from the prologue which is a description of London and does not mention Becket except as his place of birth, *Vita* is certainly a comprehensive biography. It covers detail from before his Becket's birth to well after his death. Various incidents and events in Becket's life are covered in The *Vita* in substantially differing level of detail not necessarily linked to their importance but to whether Fitzstephen was an observer or active participant. For example, the report of The Council of Clarendon (1164) occupied a mere 3 pages (in the translation by Leo Gourd) including the abbreviated text of the Constitutions.¹⁵ There were some factual errors also, for example *Vita* records that Thomas consented to the Constitutions 'with his seal'.¹⁶ Other biographers (eg Herbert Bosham) are quite specific that Becket had refused to affix his seal.¹⁷ In comparison, the report of the Council of Northampton (1164) occupies 29 pages and includes many verbatim quotes of the discussions and arguments.¹⁸ One might infer that Fitzstephen was either not present at Clarendon or performed a minor role there whereas at Northampton he performed a major

¹³ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and his Biographers*, p. 63.

¹⁴ F.Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), p. 3.

¹⁵ Gourd, pp. 59-61.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 62.

¹⁷ D.Douglas and G.Greenaway, *English Historical Documents Volume II*, (Oxford: Routledge 2nd edition, 1981), p. 770. Hereafter referred to as 'EHD'.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 64-93.

function as Becket's advocate and advisor. At one stage, the King's marshals forbade Fitzstephen to speak to Becket but he was able to do so using signs and moving his lips.¹⁹

Vita also includes a great deal of information regarding Becket's early life and especially the period during which he was Chancellor (1155-1162). There are several anecdotes which describe the relationship between Becket and the King which he describes as 'sporting together like boys of the same age'.²⁰ The account of the lavish embassy to the King of France (Louis VII) in 1158 regarding the proposed betrothal of his daughter, Margaret to Henry II's three year old son is covered in considerable detail.²¹

The evocative description of the martyrdom in *Vita* is one of the most detailed accounts (the other is that of Edward Grim, one of the other witnesses to the murder). Fitzstephen records that most of the clerics attending Becket as he was being threatened 'endeavoured to place themselves in safety'²². The three who remained with him were Fitzstephen himself, Edward Grim and 'Canon Robert'. Canon Robert was the prior of the 'House of Canons at Merton' where Becket had been cared for as a boy.²³

As a biography, *Vita* accomplishes its purpose despite being unbalanced in detail.

¹⁹ EHD, p. 778.

²⁰ Greenaway, pp. 44-45.

²¹ Ibid, pp. 46-7.

²² Mary Aelred Sinclair, *An Annotated Translation of the Life of St. Thomas Becket By William Fitzstephen (Part Two)*, (1944), Masters' Theses. Paper 369.

<<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/48598219.pdf>>, [Accessed 10th December 2022].

²³ Gourd, p. 20.

Vita as a Hagiography

There are several aspects of *Vita* which can clearly be described as hagiographical.

Firstly, Fitzstephen starts by recording anecdotes or legends appertaining to 'the Blessed Thomas' even before his birth and 'when he was yet a babe lying in his cradle'.²⁴ He continues with an anecdote when Becket's father visited his son at the Priory of Merton where he was being educated. The prior (Robert) noticed the father lying prostrate in worship of his son. When the prior remonstrated, the father replied: 'My Lord, I know what I am doing: this boy will be great in the sight of the Lord'.²⁵

Prior Robert later became Becket's Confessor and was present by his side at his martyrdom. When describing Becket's life as chancellor, *Vita* describes aspects of his generosity, hospitality, chastity, modesty, humility, and devotion to God.²⁶

Because *Vita* also shows Fitzstephen as an 'observant chronicler of the secular world, interested in the everyday, quoting pagan writers', Staunton considers him to be 'less a hagiographer than a biographer or historian'.²⁷

Vita concludes with a summary of the miracles which occurred after the martyrdom:

The blind received their sight; for the crippled, limbs were extended and made straight; for the deaf, hearing was restored. Palsied limbs were made whole; the imprisoned were released, the possessed were freed. Many other

²⁴ Greenaway, p. 35.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 36.

²⁶ Ibid. pp 41-43.

²⁷ Staunton, *Becket and his Biographers*, p. 56.

infirmities, as cancer, dropsy, ulcers, growths of tumors or suffocation caused by tumors were cured. Within the first year seven lepers were cured.²⁸

Close to the end of *The Vita*, Fitzstephen writes:

St. Thomas, martyr, innocent in mind and spotless in life, is the companion and associate of the Holy Innocents.²⁹

Vita as a History

The prologue to *Vita* is entitled 'A description of the most noble city of London'. This detailed description of social and commercial life in the city of London in the twelfth century is a widely respected contribution to the history of London. It is reprinted in full (in its original Latin version) in Stow's *Survey of London*.³⁰ The text is a panegyric of London including praise for the climate, the churches and castles, the gardens, the suburbs, the wells, the militia, the women, the schools, business (including the cookshop), the horse fair at Smooth Field (Smithfield), agriculture and sports and games.

Fitzstephen does not claim to have used any historical sources and the descriptions are presumed to have been based on his own personal knowledge of the city – which is without doubt extensive. Aspects close to his own interests are covered in detail. It is reasonable to infer that Fitzstephen was interested in horses and equestrian sports because of the detail he provides about the horse fair at Smithfield and the equestrian sports.³¹

²⁸ Sinclair, pp. 105-6.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 108.

³⁰ Stow, pp. 218-229.

³¹ EHD, pp. 1026-1029.

Although the rest of *Vita* contains a wealth of factual material which modern historians consider for the most part to be reliable, it was clearly written as a chronicle rather than as a history. Fitzstephen's intentions, well implemented, were to chronicle the events of Becket's life principally as he knew from his own personal experience.

Vita as a Work of Literature

It is in this respect that I regard *Vita* as superlative. Fitzstephen's narrative is fascinating, well written, full of interesting and relevant quotes from antiquity. It is interesting that for the period of Becket's early life, the references and quotations are from classical or pagan sources whereas after Becket became archbishop the references are almost wholly biblical. This was possibly intended to reflect the concept of Becket's conversion from 'the Old Man' to 'the New Man'.

The important events in the life of the Thomas Becket at which Fitzstephen was personally involved are described in beautifully crafted language (I can only comment on the translations rather than the original text), which bring these incidents vibrantly and colourfully to life for the reader. Examples are the excesses of the embassy to the King of France in 1158, the Council of Northampton in 1164 and the final tragedy in Canterbury in 1170. Light relief is also present. Who can fail to smile at the anecdotes of the boyish antics of King Henry II and Becket as his chancellor. An example is the story that sometimes Henry would interrupt Becket at dinner – on horseback and with an arrow in his hand.³²

³² Gourd, pp. 32-33.

Conclusion

I consider *Vita* by William Fitz Stephen to be by far the most valuable, important, informative and well-written of any of the twelfth century biographies. As a biography it lacks only detail about Becket during the period of his exile (Fitzstephen did not accompany him). It is a hagiography for the most part – dealing with the miracles surrounding his birth and childhood, the sanctity of his life even before his ordination as archbishop and the detail of his martyrdom and the countless miracles very shortly after his death. There are, however, some aspects of the story which are a little out of place in a hagiography.

The work has a wealth of detail but for the most part this is not researched but came from Fitzstephen's own recollections. To that extent it is more of a chronicle than a history.

As a work of literature it surpasses all the other lives by a considerable distance. Fitzstephen was not a known historian or writer and therefore we have no other products of his pen.

The mystery of who William Fitzstephen was remains a mystery. Although not proved, I am persuaded that it is likely that he was the brother of Ralph Fitzstephen, the grandson of the captain of the White Ship and the great-grandson of the captain of William of Normandy's ship taking him to Hastings in 1066. He would therefore be likely to have been the person appointed to the post of Sheriff of Gloucestershire in 1171 to 1189 and to have died in c1191.

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