

SESSION 9

Thomas Becket: the man and the legend

In the fifteen years or so after his death no fewer than eleven lives of Becket were composed. And the written tradition grew with works such as the Icelandic saga, *Thomas Saga Erkibyskups*, probably written between 1200 and 1250. Thomas Becket the archbishop and martyr now became Thomas Becket the legend. For this session you should consider the value of the contemporary lives as historical evidence and at how the writings of those who know Becket personally developed as his cult spread. Think about the bias or positioning of those who wrote, and how this affected their portrayal of the man and the issues.

Reading Guide

Essential for this is Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, and especially the brief but valuable account of the Lives and their authorship on pp. 1–9. See also Duggan, *Thomas Becket*, pp. 224–52. Extracts from the early lives have been included in the readings for various units. There is a modern translation of Guernes (Garnier) in Shirley 1975.

Rather later accounts, which contributed to the development of the legend, are to be found in Jacobus a Voragine, *Legenda Aurea*, written c. 1260 (text from Grainger, *The Golden Legend*, 59–62).

In visual arts, there is a fragment of an illuminated life of Becket (see Backhouse and De Hamel, *The Becket Leaves*), and the stained glass of Canterbury is described by Caviness. A full treatment of visual representations comes in Borenius, *St Thomas in Art* (though this can be difficult to get hold of but I have a copy I can lend you).

The fullest treatment of the creation of the legend is in Brown, *The Legend of St Thomas*. A copy is available from me.

In summary you should look for additions to contemporary accounts of Becket; these include: incidents from Becket's childhood, such as the escape from drowning; additional miracles (the mending of the hair shirt); visions (such as the martyrdom); legends of the murderers.

The most startling addition is the Saracen mother of Becket, which appears within 100 years of Becket's death, and is depicted visually in the Queen Mary's Psalter.

Consider as well the way in which Thomas appears as the 'champion of the masses', as depicted in the Becket leaves.



Trinity Chapel: The Becket windows



Trinity Chapel: one of the miracles at Becket's tomb

Becket, theatre and film: Anouilh's 'Becket'

The French playwright Jean Anouilh wrote his play *Becket, ou l'honneur de Dieu* (*Becket, or the honour of God*) in 1959. It was translated into English and published in English translation by Methuen, 1961 (repr. many times and still in print, ISBN 0 413 32060 X). Anouilh follows a historiographical tradition which emerged in France in the 19th century, that of the Saxon origins of Becket. In 1964 Anouilh's play was brought to the screen as the film *Becket*, directed by Peter Grenville and starring Richard Burton and Peter O'Toole. This is an entertaining film, and useful in demonstrating how Becket and the controversy that led to his death have been represented in popular culture.

Reading Guide

As well as reading Anouilh's play (in French or English) you might find it useful to consult Natalie Zemon Davies, 'any resemblance to persons living or dead: film and the challenge of authenticity', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 8 (1988), 269–83.

