

Becket: what kind of Becket?

Session 9



Contemporary sources

Before Thomas's death

letters (Thomas, Henry II, Pope,
Gilbert Foliot, other bishops)

Thomas realised the importance of
preserving letters

Alan of Tewkesbury made a collection of
letters relating to Thomas, 1174-76

Later sources

- Chronicles
 - Gervase of Canterbury
 - William of Newburgh (Yorkshire Augustinian canon)
 - Matthew Paris (St Albans, 13th century)

The Lives – post mortem

- 12 written between 1171 and the early thirteenth century
- Many written shortly after Thomas's death, with events fresh in the mind
- John of Salisbury, Edward Grim, William of Canterbury, Benedict of Peterborough, and William fitz Stephen were in the cathedral at the time of the murder

Interrelationship

- Many are textually interrelated – they borrow from each other
- Benedict, Edward Grim, Guernes (Garnier), William of Canterbury, Anon II all rely on oral tradition from Canterbury
- There is evidence of relationship among John of Salisbury, Benedict, Anon I, Robert of Cricklade, William of Canterbury and Edward Grim

Value

- Some particularly well informed personally
- William fitz Stephen interested in law and particularly informed on Thomas as chancellor but little on the exile
- Herbert of Bosham with Thomas in exile



Think about

- What kind of man they portray (the grand gesture, obstinacy, heroism)
- How they see the issues
- What kind of saint they portray (miracles limited to pre-natal visions on the part of Thomas's mother; no lifetime miracles; stress on piety, austerity, chastity)

The creation of the legend

- Later lives e.g. Icelandic saga
- Collections of lives – *Quadrilogus*
- *Legenda Aurea* (Jacobus a Voragine c. 1260) – Caxton's English version, 1483
- Popular tradition
- Drama and film (20th century)

What do these add?

Lifetime miracles

- Garnier adds a story of how Thomas as a youth had a narrow escape from drowning and this is embroidered by Anon I. Icelandic Saga makes this into a miracle.
- Alan of Tewkesbury and the miraculous provision of fish

The fate of the killers

- E.g. they go to Rome and are sent on pilgrimage by the pope to visit the holy places and fight the pagans. They died there / came back and founded an abbey in Somerset.
- The 'Flanders tradition' – they lost their sense of smell and had to wander around till they found it again. They died in Flanders.

Extensive post- mortem miracles

- An avenging saint
- Punishes abuse of power
- Christ-like healing



Becket as champion of the people

- Appeals to the popular imagination

Saxon descent

- This seems to arise from the fact that Thomas was the first archbishop of Canterbury after the Conquest to have been born in England
- Transferred to Saxon descent
- Thierry, *History of the Conquest of England*, trans. Hazlitt (1856)
- So, Thomas becomes the hero of an oppressed race.

Saracen mother

- This has wide currency
 - Seems to come in within 100 years
 - *South English Legendary* 1280 x 1290
 - Basic story has analogues in the *Arabian Nights*
 - Analogue in Orderic Vitalis's story of the imprisonment of Bohemund by a Turkish emir and his release by the emir's daughter
 - Romance of Bevis of Hamtoun
 - Short story in Mirk's *Festial*

Basic story

- Thomas's mother was a Saracen who followed Thomas's rather to London, knowing only two words 'Gilbert' and 'London'
- She found Gilbert, converted, and married
- Probably comes into the Becket tradition through the crusades. In 1191 Richard I had a vision of Thomas while on crusade and after the capture of Acre a hospital dedicated to St Thomas of Acre was founded in London at Thomas's birthplace.

Themes

- Conversion
- Unity of East and West
- Pursuit of destiny against all odds

Queen Mary's Psalter, early 14th century

- 22 scenes, from the point at which the Saracen princess reaches London and is recognised by Gilbert's servant, Richard, to Thomas's burial and him kneeling before Christ in Heaven.



OTHER VISUAL IMAGES

BL Cotton Claudius B II c. 1180



Early copy of John of Salisbury's 'Life'; owned by the Augustinian abbey of Cirencester

BL MS Harley 5012 (c. 1200)

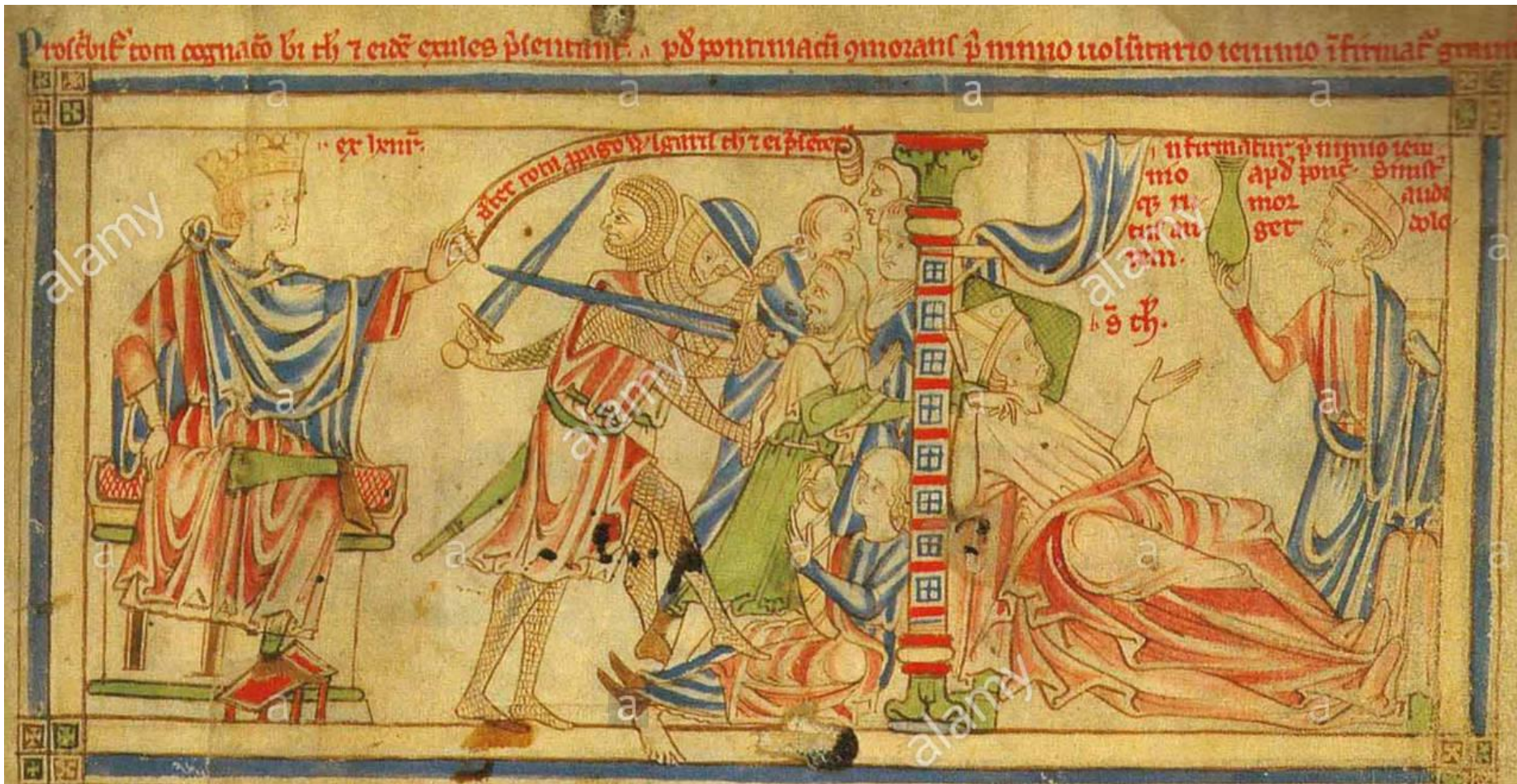




The Becket Leaves

- The following slides are taken from the Becket Leaves

Fol. 1r: The exile of Thomas's family (L) Thomas at Pontigny (R)



Fol. 1v: Thomas and the pope take their leave



Fol. 2r: Excommunications at Vézelay (L), Thomas arguing before Henry and Louis (R)



Fol. 2v: Thomas takes leave of the two
kings



Fol. 3r: coronation of the Young King



Fol. 3v: Thomas receives news of the coronation (L) and complains to the pope (R)



Fol. 4r: return to England



Fol. 4v: greeted by the crowds

