

Commentary on a visual source

John Cooper-Hammond

Student No: 2022129

Chosen visual source: folio 2 verso of the Becket Leaves.



Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

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For completion by the student:		
Student Name: John Cooper-Hammond		
Module code: HPMS 7006 Module title: Past Peoples, Present Societies: Research Methods & Skills	Student ID number: 2022129	Educational support needs: No
Module tutor: Janet Burton		
Assignment due date: 22nd November 2021		
If your module has multiple submissions please indicate which piece of work this is.		
1 st ☒ 2 nd ☐ 3 rd ☐ 4 th ☐ 5 th ☐ Assessment 1: Commentary on a visual source		
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Assignment Mark

1 st Marker's Provisional mark	
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Final Mark	

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The Becket Leaves¹ are, probably, the remnants of a longer document which appears to have been an illustrated life of Becket written in verse, however only four folio leaves survive. They are considered to have been produced around 1220 – 1240,² that is within fifty to seventy years after Becket's death.



Historians have not identified the author/illustrator, although some have suggested Mathew Paris. He is known to have produced other verse lives of saints and the writing and artistic style are similar to his in other known works³.

Scene from Matthew Paris' Life of Saint Alban⁴

It could be that he oversaw the production if he was not the

author/artist. All the surviving leaves deal with the time of Becket's exile. There were attempts to reconcile the two sides, Henry II of England, Louis VII of France and three Papal Legates met Thomas Becket at Montmirail (Marne), on the 6th of January 1169, to hold peace talks. Becket submitted to Henry excepting only on

¹ The Becket Leaves are four folio pages on vellum belonging to the J. Paul Getty Trust and on permanent loan to the British Museum

² Janet Backhouse & Christopher Hamel, 1998, *The Becket Leaves*, London: The British Library p 17

³ Ibid

⁴ Contained in Matthew Paris' 'Life of Saint Alban' manuscript, held at Trinity College, Dublin MS 177

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one point. Becket invalidated the agreement, in Henry's opinion, by adding the words 'salvo honore dei.' Henry raged against Becket and the negotiations failed. This illustration depicts the final scene at Montmirail as Becket departs, leaving Henry and Louis following the unsuccessful attempt at reconciliation. The caption reads : *Reges Ludovicus et Henricus et sui complices. Recedit beatus Thomas multis lacessitus injuriis, et derisus a magnatibus. Soli pauperes benedictionem ejus petunt.* [Kings Louis and Henry and their accomplices. Blessed Thomas retreated having provoked many injuries and great mockery. Only the poor ask for his blessing.]

On the left of the picture Henry and Louis are seen making angry/despairing gestures, whilst their followers are directing mockery and disparagement at the archbishop. On the right are the ordinary folk who are seeking the blessings of Thomas. Between the two Becket rides away from the kings towards the people, he is looking back and seems to be making a gesture towards the two monarchs. This gesture may be read as him raising a hand in blessing on the people, or (as my grandson would say) "giving the rude finger" to the kings. Although what is really meant by this gesture cannot now be known, it may have always been a deliberate ambiguity, or may have a different contemporary meaning to a modern interpretation of it.

As in all the 'Leaves', the picture has triple boxed edging⁵, in a number of instances the third, inner box, is used on the bottom edge as base for the figures, thus giving a slight illusion of depth. Otherwise the border is plain with a red centre line, the corners are boxed and contain four quadrilateral grids in blue or red. This method of bordering is common to all eight of the illustrations of the 'Leaves', although the colours do vary. There are no marginalia. This style is possibly adopted as these are illustrations linked to the text below, which may/may not be deemed more important. This picture provides good historical information concerning aspects of life, it provides details of clothing, weapons, and accoutrements, of the time in which it was produced, and the contrast between the nobility and church with the ordinary people. There is a care of details, such as the horse harnesses, the studded horseshoes, and the fact that the main figures are riding stallions – an indication of power and status. What cannot be inferred is the accuracy of the portraiture of the kings and Becket. However, Henry appears to have red hair and beard, as he was known to have and Louis is shown to be fair.⁶ Becket is shown as bearded, as tends to be

⁵ This style is found in works originating from Saint Alban's Abbey; for example, the Apocalypse manuscript BL Additional MS 35166 ff22b-23

⁶ As he is shown in other medieval illustrations, e.g.: In the Book of Hours of Charles VIII of France. Artist Antoine Vérard.

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the case in early depictions⁷. Whereas some aspects of the picture may be taken as reliable and accurate, care must be taken as there is no way for the modern viewer to verify all the information given, nor to understand either any artistic licence or deliberate changes made. Additionally the picture may contain clues or references understood by the C13th viewer whose meanings are not now known.

Although this exercise is considering the picture, the rest of the page contains two columns of text which tells of the story of this episode of Becket's exile (see appendix). The text itself is written to start in red but mostly in dark brown ink in an early gothic script. Some small initial letters are in red or blue with associated decorative pen work. The caption on the picture and the accompanying text are all in French and the latter in verse. This indicates that this work was not written for the church, or as a formal life or hagiography, but was intended more for a lay readership. The putative audience would have been the French speaking classes in England, that is, the aristocracy and the wealthy, and those in the wider European society, outside the religious, who were sufficiently literate and had leisure in which to read – again the aristocracy and the wealthy.

This illustration, as with the other 'Leaves' are not meant to be a comic strip, but rather to illustrate the story being told, of this part of Becket's life, to help it on its way, to maintain interest and to ensure the book is not just pages of text. It is difficult, with only an eight-page fragment of a longer document to perceive any nuances in the way the story is told. By the time of its writing the killing of Becket, his canonisation as Saint Thomas, Henry's penance was known, Becket's remains had been translated to a magnificent new tomb in 1220, due to popularity of pilgrimage and the order of Thomas of Acon was founded in the 1230s. It is unlikely this document was seeking to publicise Saint Thomas. Also, Magna Carta had been signed and Henry III was established on his throne. If the author was seeking to make a political point or a religious one cannot be known. However, he⁸ was certainly seeking to entertain his readers.

Word count:

Text: 1,146

Appendix: 496

⁷ Cotton MS Bii, f214v British Library c 1180 has a bearded Becket. However, he is shown clean shaven the alabaster martyrdom s 1425-1450, British Museum 1890,0809.1

⁸ This is seen as gender neutral, but evidence shows that most known authorship in the early C 13th was by men

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Bibliography:

Backhouse, Janet & de Hamel, Christopher, 1988, *The Becket Leaves*, London: The British Library

Backhouse, Janet, 1997, *The illuminated page: ten centuries of manuscript painting in the British Library*, London: The British Library

De Beer, Lloyd & Speakman, Naomi, 2021, *Thomas Becket: murder and the making of a saint*, London: The British Museum – to accompany an exhibition of the same name at the British Museum 22 April – 22 August 2021

Appendix: the words that accompany this picture, with a modern translation



Original

De cuncil escriez s'en part;
Gent encuntre chescune part
Ki demandent la beneiçun;
Dist chescun a sun cumpaginun:
"Veez le leal advocat
Deu, ki sul pur li combat."

Mais n'entent mie cument,
Fors par un cummun parlement
U fuissent present tuit troi,
L'arcevesque, il e lu roi.
Purparlé l'ad e purveu,
K'ensemble sunt tuit troi venu,
E d'une e d'autre part grant gent
Ki pur la pès i sunt present.
Li rois Henris vint volentiers,
Kar dit li eurent messagiers
Ke l'arcevesque, seüst de fi,
Ses mettroit tut en sa merci.
Quant tuit furent assemblé
Li roi, li cunte e li lettré,
L'arcevesque s'en humilie,

As pez le rei Henri se plie,
E li dist: "Beu sire roi,
Entendez, s'il vus plest, a moi:
Ma cause tute a vus cumand;
Faites ent vostre cumand.
Trestute a vostre plaisir
L'abandon a grant laisir,
Sauf l'onur de Deu." Atant
Mue li rois Henris semblant;
Plus est irez ke n'est leun,
U quant blescé se sent dragun,
E dist: "Hai! tant mal assis
Les biens u par moi es mis!"
Puis s'est turnez au roi de France,
E dist: "Oez grant decevance,
Cum ore muet descord e scisme
Par wenelaz e par sofisme!
E ki tut muet sul le descord
A tuz fait entendre k'ai tort,
Kar par cest mot 'sauf l'onur
De Deu' nus met tuz en errur."

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Translation

From the council they leave shouting;
People against each side
Who demand blessing;
Each says to his companion:
"See the loyal advocate
Of God, who alone combats for him."
But he [Louis] doesn't understand how [he'll
arrange this peace],
Except by a common meeting
Where all three are present,
The archbishop, him, and the king.
To speak and to agree
That all three are come together
And many people from this party or that
Who are present there for peace.
King Henry comes willingly,
Because his messengers had told him
That the archbishop, they knew for sure,
Would put all at his mercy.
When all were assembled
The king, the count, and the learned one,
The archbishop with humility

Bows at the feet of King Henry,
And says to him, "Good sire king
Please listen to me:
I commend my cause to you;
Make your command about it.
All at your pleasure
At your discretion and leisure,
Saving the honour of God." At this
King Henry seems moved;
He's angrier than a lion
Or a dragon who feels himself wounded,
And says, "Ha! how badly seated
Are the good things placed by me!"
Then he turned to the king of France,
And said, "Hear great deception,
As now puts discord and schism
By trickery and by sophism!
And which puts all in discord
Makes everyone think I'm wrong,
For by these words, 'saving the honour
Of God,' he puts us all in the wrong."

C.J Birkitt's Becket Leaves website at

[Becket Leaves Original French Page 4 \(angelfire.com\)](http://angelfire.com)