Retelling Tales

The Life of St Thomas Becket

The Medieval and Early Modern Research Initiative
And The Pupils of Llanishen High School

Sponsored by the School of English, Communication and Philosophy,

Cardiff University

Images: The Pupils of Llanishen High School

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School of English,
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Ysgol Saesneg, Cyfathrebu
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Cardiff University's Medieval and Early Modern Research Initiative, founded in 2009, is the research hub for staff and students working in medieval and renaissance studies in the School of English, Communication and Philosophy (ENCAP). It runs a seminar series each year, featuring the latest research by national and international scholars, as well as a regular reading group for staff and postgraduates; it also hosts conferences and sponsors panels at national and international conferences.

The *Life of St Thomas Becket* is the first in a series we have called 'Retelling Tales'. The aim of this series and its related projects is to bring together ENCAP's staff and postgraduates working in medieval and early modern studies with secondary school pupils, developing a dialogue between local schools and Cardiff University.

We are very grateful to Eva Hazeltine and the students of Llanishen High School for making this 'lytel book' of Becket's life such a vibrant retelling.

Foreword

No less than our present age, medieval society was a powerfully visual culture. At a time when few were able to read or write, and when modes of communication over any substantial distance were by no means instant, the role of the image was crucial. An image – whether a painting, sculpture, tapestry or fresco – could direct the imagination, memorialise an event, focus wandering thoughts, embody a belief or moral, or even signify a way to behave.

Indeed, the authority of the image was so great that some medieval thinkers expressed alarm at people's reliance on the visual to the detriment of the written word. Yet when, in the late sixth century, a certain Bishop of Marseille instructed his fraternity to remove all religious iconography from his church, for fear of sacrilege, he earned swift rebuke from Pope Gregory the Great. The Bishop, he wrote, should have preserved the images, for his illiterate congregation could 'have read by looking at the walls what they could not read in books'.

A scribe at work on a manuscript. From 'Le Roman de la Rose' (C14th) NLW MS 5016D. F.28r. Digitised by the National Library of Wales

Of course, for the literate at least, the reading of an image is not always distinct from the reading of a written text. And the entwined relationship between word and image is nowhere more powerfully apparent to the student of

medieval culture than in the richly adorned illuminated manuscripts appearing from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.

Illuminated Manuscripts

A 'Puzzle' initial from William Fitzstephen's 'Vita Sancti Thomae Becket' (C15th). Lansdowne 398 F.8v. Digitised by the British Library

Creating an illustrated manuscript – especially with the sort of illuminated miniatures like the examples below – was a complex, expensive and enormously time-consuming project, utilising the skills of many different artisans.

It began with the production of vellum (animal skin that was stretched out and treated) and, by the later Middle Ages, paper, which was then cut and folded together to form quires that were then assembled into a book. Scribes would then create the layout of pages, planning the space for text and for images, before other scribes would begin the process of copying out the textual part by hand. Once the scribe was finished, the illuminator would prepare the page for the illustration – smoothing the sheet and drying it out with powdered bones. Next the sketch would be made and retraced; then the gold leaf would be added and then burnished; finally, colours and inks would be applied for volume and detail. And then onto the next image, which might be an ornate initial letter, a miniature, or some intricate scroll work around the border of the text or an especially important image.

Not all illuminations were finished. In this image from the 'Abingdon Apocalypse', only the sketch and layering of gold leaf was completed. What happened to the colour? Add MS 42555 f.44r. Digitised by the British Library.

Such an elaborate process was usually reserved for special books – Bibles, 'Books of Hours', histories of important figures, or tales of great leaders and heroes. While monks did most of the work in the early medieval period, by the end of the Middle Ages (c. 1400-1550) much of the work was undertaken in specialist workshops (*scriptoria*) in the larger cities, and often involved women scribes and artists.

Medieval art is very different from later art forms – particularly what we think of as 'realist' forms developing from the Renaissance onwards. For instance, medieval painting and illustration is famously two-dimensional and flat-seeming: there is no use of perspective to provide a sense of depth. The device of perspective is associated with Renaissance and later art: the key to it is to organise all the elements of a painting towards a single vanishing point, which also – crucially – constructs a single viewing position. Thus the individual viewer is the key to understanding the picture and, by implication, the world. Medieval art lacks perspective because medieval culture, simply, did not value the viewpoint of the individual in this manner.

Medieval images can be different in other ways. Rather than illustrate a certain detail in a story (as in, say, illustrations to a nineteenth-century novel), medieval illustrations are often more emblematic of the themes, narrative and preoccupations of the text. They were also highly stylised, allowing viewers/readers to instantly identity the king, the saint, the knight, the lady, etc. Again, individualism remained very far from the artist's aesthetic.

A Life of St Thomas Becket

This little book is a certain type of religious text, popular in the Middle Ages, known as a 'hagiography', or a biography of a saint.

Hagiographies were written in Latin and vernacular languages, recounted both local and international religious figures, and could be owned and used by both clerical and lay persons alike. They were enormously popular throughout the medieval period – and were also remarkably varied. Some hagiographies told of near-contemporary saints, others deal with figures of a distant, legendary past. Some are recognisably 'historical' in scope; others contain great quantities of myth and folklore, and can feature dragons,

The death of Becket (C14th); Harley 5102 f.32. Digitised by the British Library

talking animals and 'fairy-tale' settings.

As Charlotte Pruce, whose doctoral thesis in part focuses on the retellings of St Thomas Becket's life, explains at the end of this book, Becket is the most important of all the insular saints. He was subject to at least ten hagiographies in the years after his death at the hands of four knights at Canterbury Cathedral in the winter of 1170; his shrine at Canterbury made the cathedral there the pre-eminent destination for pilgrims until the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, which put paid to many such practices.

At the kind invitation of Eva Hazeltine, this summer we turned one classroom of Llanishen High School for just two hours into a medieval *scriptorum*. Here, Sharpies replaced gold leaf; pens replaced natural inks mixed with powdered bones; and A4 worksheets were used instead of vellum. And despite the modern tools, the illustrations produced by the Year 8 and 9 students of Llanishen for this 'Life of Becket' demonstrate great understanding of the function, process and aesthetics of medieval manuscript illumination – from the intricate scroll work that adorns several of the images, the frequent inclusion of marginalia (from ornate borders to homicidal rabbits), the use of symbolic colour, the consistent two-dimensional representation of dynamic narrative moments, and the ability to pick out vital themes and scenes and to render them in terms of static, episodic art.

We were only able to use a small selection of the images produced that day in order to assemble a coherent visual narrative of Becket's life and death. The full range of images, worksheets and slides are available at the Cardiff MEMORI blog: http://cardiffmemori.wordpress.com.

Rob Gossedge
Director of the Medieval and Early Modern Research Initiative

The Life and Death of St Thomas Becket

Josh Timson

Mia Thomas

Megan Thomas

Thomas Becket was born in December 1119 in Cheapside, London. After leaving school, he worked as a cleric and soon became a skilful administrator. By 1155, he was made Lord Chancellor, an important advisor to the King, Henry II, who was soon his friend.

Their friendship was not to last. In 1162 King Henry made Becket (who was not yet a priest) Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket soon made it known that his allegiance now belonged to the Church rather than to the King. Becket and his former friend began a series of arguments that would shake Christian England.

Guilherme Moreira

Holly Craddock

By 1164 Becket was fearing for his life, and fled to France, where he remained for six years under the protection of the Pope and the French King.

Tanya Ashraf

Iona Watts

Some stories about his years here are far-fetched. There is even a tale in which Becket, demonstrating his sanctity, turned water into wine – but Becket was so holy he would only drink water, and so turned the wine back to water again! In 1170, Becket was back in England, and was reconciled with King Henry. At least for a short time.

Katy Rennie

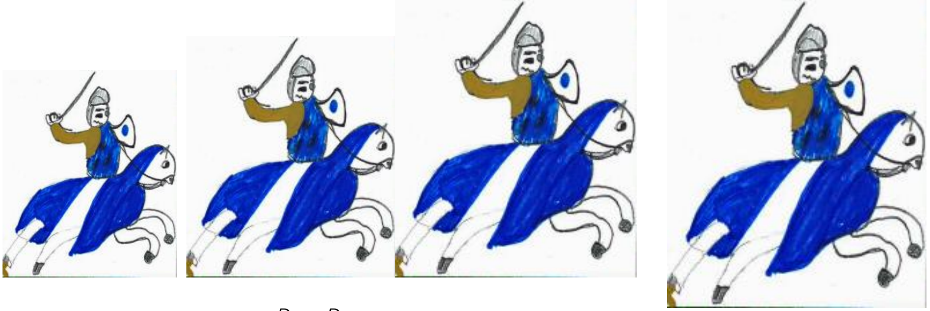
Sophie Gove

Rebecca Clayton

Once back in England, Thomas continued to preach in ways that displeased the king. He also excommunicated many of his enemies.

King Henry was furious and supposedly uttered the famous words: 'who will rid me of this troublesome priest?'

Scarlett Doherty



Drey Day

Four knights overheard the King's cry and set off to Canterbury to follow his 'orders'. The city's people were frightened at their arrival. And when the knights entered the cathedral to arrest Becket some of the monks hid under the alter.

Seren Carson

Ellie Freese

When the four knights arrived at Canterbury Cathedral they demanded that he answer to the King for his actions. Becket refused, and the scene soon became violent.

As Becket prayed, the knights attacked the Archbishop. The top of his head was cut off and his brains and blood were scattered upon the cathedral's floor.

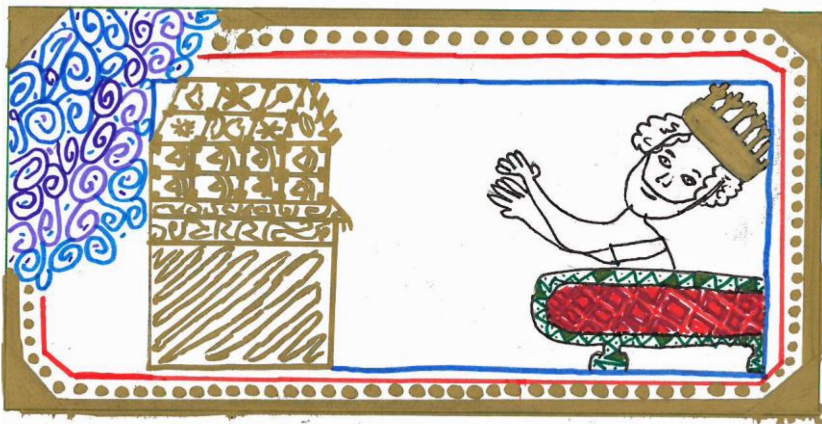
Lauren H

Allysa Gully

Morgan Evans

As the knights fled, the priests took up Becket's body and prepared it for burial. Beneath his archbishop's robes they discovered that Becket had worn a hairshirt – an undergarment of coarse uncomfortable material – that many understood to be a sign of his holiness.

Becket was made a saint in 1173. Pilgrims from all over Europe travelled to Canterbury to venerate at Becket's shrine (and wily monks even sold phials of what they claimed was Becket's blood and brains mixed with water). Even King Henry II visited the shrine, and paid homage to his former friend.



Eve

The ‘Becket Affair’

The ‘Becket Affair’ was the first great crisis of the Middle Ages between Church and State. Not only did Becket’s defence of ecclesiastical liberties make an important point at the time about the sanctity of the Church’s independence, it set an important precedent that would be repeatedly invoked in the centuries that followed.

Thomas Becket was born in London on 21 December c. 1119 to an English mother and a Norman (French) father. He attended a London grammar school where he received a basic education in grammar, logic and rhetoric – the three main strands of the twelfth-century curriculum. With the help of family connections, he acquired a position in Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury’s household and, in 1154, he was promoted to Archdeacon of Canterbury, a position of considerable ecclesiastical and administrative influence. Just one year later, as a result of his success as the ‘eye of the bishop’, he was made Chancellor to Henry II, with whom he became close friends. Becket soon proved himself an effective negotiator and, in June 1162, the King made him Archbishop of Canterbury, the most important position in the English Church.

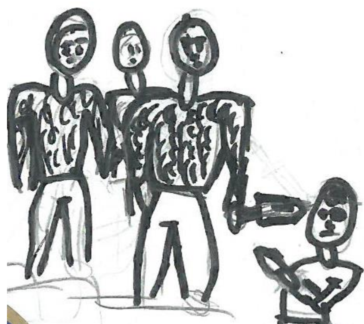
Sophie Morris

However, just three months after his consecration, Thomas Becket unexpectedly resigned the Chancellorship, arguing that his new role as the head of the Church in England was incompatible with involvement in the affairs of state. This destroyed Henry II's plans to control both Church and State through Thomas, and the previously close relationship between the pair deteriorated. These existing tensions were heightened beyond repair when, in 1164, Becket refused to submit to Henry's demand for control over ecclesiastical courts as part of the Constitutions of Clarendon. Henry, who had counted Becket as ally, was furious and, in November, amidst swirling tensions and barbed threats of violence, Becket fled to France in fear of his life.

Maryam Mohammed

After more than six years in exile, on 22 July 1170 a tentative peace was reached and, following a reconciliation with the King, Becket returned to Canterbury. The peace was not to last, however, and shortly after his return Thomas Becket broke his vow by dramatically excommunicating Ranulph de Broc, Joscelin, Bishop of Salisbury, Roger, Archbishop of York, and Gilbert Foliot, Bishop of London, his greatest enemies and rivals. Exclusion from the Church was one of the most serious punishments available in the Middle Ages and the bishops departed to inform the King of Becket's actions. Upon overhearing Henry's fury, four knights – Reginald FitzUrse, Hugh de Morville, William de Tracy and Richard le Breton – left Henry's court in the middle of the night and rode to Canterbury.

Entering the cathedral on 29 December 1170, the four knights, who initially came unarmed, found Becket at the altar. They demanded that he accompany them to Winchester, the seat of royal power, and give an account of his actions. Becket, however, stood firm, defying the King's knights. Angered by his refusal to submit, the knights left to arm themselves. As they re-entered the cathedral, Becket reportedly refused pleas from the Canterbury monks to move to a place of safety and prayed, 'For the name of Jesus and



Callie Channon

the protection of the Church, I am ready to embrace death.' The knights attacked Becket. Although a cleric, Edward Grim, who later wrote a Life of Becket, attempted to defend the Archbishop, within a matter of blows the top of the Becket's head was cut off, his brains and blood scattering upon the cathedral's floor.

Anastasia Bondarenco

The violence of Becket's death, combined with the holiness of his defence of the Church, meant that there were immediately calls that he should be recognised as a saint. This argument quickly gained popular support and more than ten hagiographies, or 'Saints' Lives', were written in support of Becket's canonisation. A cult soon sprang up and pilgrims came from across Europe to pray and buy phials of 'Becket's water' – a dilution of Becket's blood and brains that was reported to have healing properties. Finally, on 21 February 1173, Thomas Becket was formally canonised by Pope Alexander. He remained the most important English saint until the time of the Reformation.

Despite Becket's canonisation, however, the King's position had remained complicated. In the aftermath of Becket's death, Henry had distanced himself from the crime and even tried to place the blame on Thomas himself. However, as Becket's cult gained followers, the King's position began to change. Finally, in July 1174, Henry II walked barefoot through the streets of Canterbury in an act of penance – hoping to atone for the part that he had played in Becket's murder. He submitted himself to be whipped by the monks of Canterbury and kept a night-long vigil at Becket's tomb. When his troops successfully captured the King of Scotland just three days later, England universally interpreted the victory as a sign that, through his penance, Henry had won Becket's forgiveness.

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