

The knife of St Thomas Becket at Bath

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The volume now preserved as Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 111, includes a compilation of early material from Bath cathedral priory, including gospel lections for various liturgical feasts, historical and topographical matter, and transcripts of charters from the monastic archive. This material is prefaced by shorter texts on the opening leaves, including two lists of relics owned by the monks in the 11th and 12th centuries. The longer of these lists was removed from another early Bath manuscript also at Corpus, MS 140, apparently by Matthew Parker, who bequeathed both volumes to the College in 1574. Because it contains unique, early material, some of it in late Old English, the Bath section of MS 111 is well-known to scholars and its contents have all been printed before.¹ As such, the record of a knife of St Thomas Becket included in one of the relic-lists is not a new discovery. Equally, however, nobody has ever discussed this curious item: to remedy this, the present article will examine the way it is recorded and provide some context for it. The record is concise and there is no other evidence to flesh it out, so little can be said of the knife itself. However, at least four other knives ascribed to Becket are documented in other locations, and these provide grounds for reasonable speculation about the relic at Bath.

The primary list of Bath's relics, taken from Corpus MS 140 and now on p. 7 of MS 111, contains about 130 entries.² As far as one can tell, this represents a large collection by the standards of the period in which it was made, and reflects an energetic process of relic-acquisition in the first century of the monastery's existence.³ According to a preamble, the list was compiled at the behest of Ælfsige, the last abbot (reigned c. 1075-87). Its makers evidently preferred to write in Old English, which is used for the prose sections, but most of the relics are identified in Latin. As I. G. Thomas has pointed out, this may be due to straightforward copying of Latin labels on relic-containers.⁴ This is indeed the only likely explanation, for the relics, which presumably consisted of little pieces of bone, cloth, wood, etc. of nondescript appearance, cannot have been identifiable by sight with the saints associated with them: the compilers must have relied on written sources. A supplement to the list has been added at the bottom in a different hand, recording relics given by a man named Wulfwine of Reading. The addition is an early one, although it cannot be dated precisely. It suggests, in any case, that the monks continued to build their collection,

presumably in the belief that the quantity and diversity of the relics they owned contributed to the spiritual validity of their house.

The second relic-list, written in Latin in a 12th-century hand on p. 6, has always belonged to MS 111 (Fig. 1). There is no heading or preamble to explain its purpose, but it probably represents a further augmentation of the collection, as it contains items not found in the primary list. In all, there are entries for relics of 26 saints, the last of which is 'a knife of Saint Thomas, archbishop and martyr' (*Item, Cultellum Sancti Thome archiepiscopi et martyris*). This final entry is written in the same hand but located five lines below the others. Why did the scribe decide to single it out like this? No firm answer can be given to this question. One possibility is that he was copying from an earlier list of relics to which the record of Becket's knife was itself an oddly placed addition. As such, he may simply have replicated the arrangement of his source. Alternatively, the knife may have been thought worthy of emphasis in a period when interest in Becket was growing exponentially and religious houses in England were scrambling to obtain relics relating to his cult. The style of the hand suggests the list was written towards the end of the 12th century, with the date of Becket's murder (29 December 1170) as the *terminus post quem*. The relic itself could have arrived somewhat earlier because a knife, as an accessory not implicated in the murder, could have reached Bath during the saint's lifetime. In any case, it is clear enough from the hand that the knife was at Bath early in the cult's history.

It is impossible to know why the monks obtained a knife rather than one of the more common corporeal or vestment relics that poured out of Canterbury during this period. Quite possibly, they took what they were given, as opposed to what they could obtain on their own initiative, for any such initiative is overwhelmingly likely to have produced a corporeal relic such as blood, brain, flesh, or bone, by itself or soaked into cloth. Ordinarily, so provisional a suggestion would not warrant speculation about a donor, but as Reginald fitz Jocelin, bishop of Bath from 1174 to 1191, is known to have gifted Becket-relics elsewhere, it seems harmless (at least) to introduce him here. Specifically, Reginald gave to Margaret of Navarre, queen of Sicily, relics of Becket's blood and blood-soaked vestments, including the cloak, hair-shirt, cowl, shoe, and shirt. The evidence for this is a pair of Latin inscriptions on a small pendant

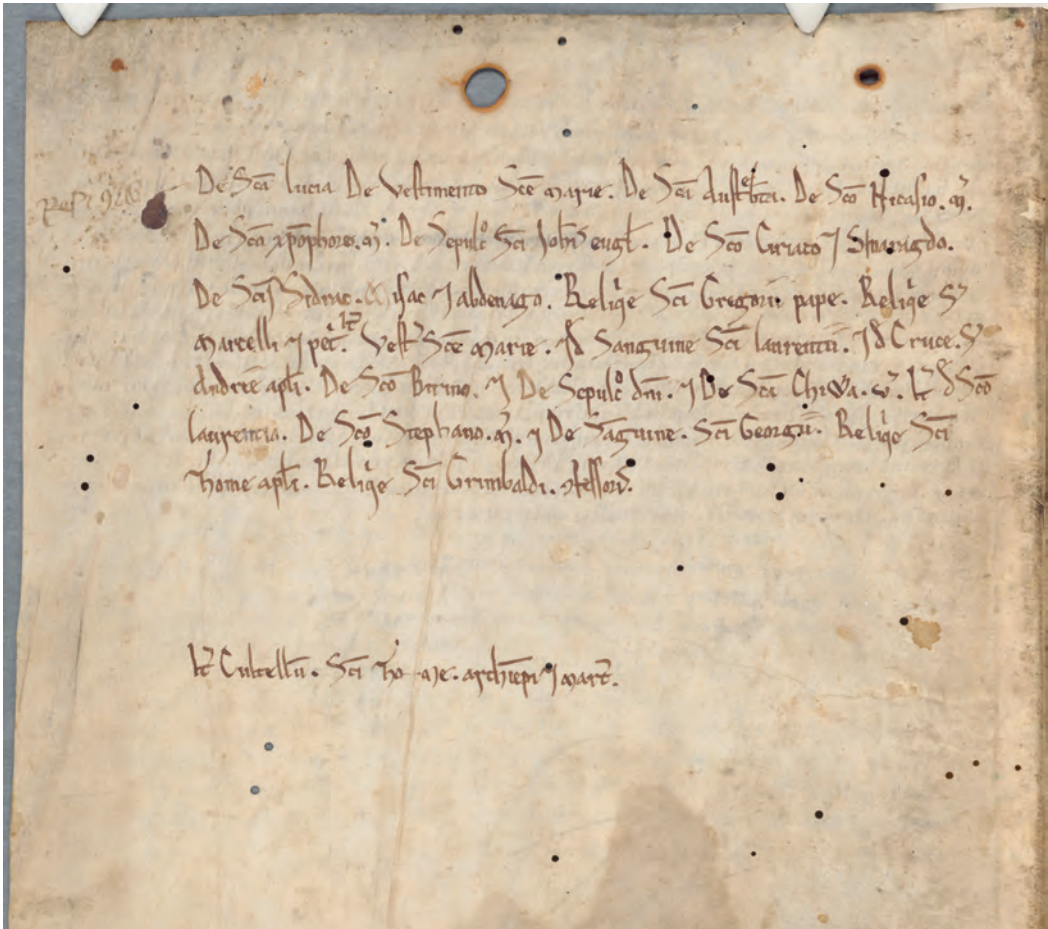


Fig. 1 The relic-list on Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 111, p. 6 (Photo: author; reproduced by permission of the Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge)

reliquary made of gold, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (acc. no. 63.160). This object only measures 51×32mm, demonstrating how small such relics could be. On one side, where the inscription surrounded a now-empty relic-cavity, the items mentioned above are listed: *De sanguine Sancti Thome martyris. De vestibis suis sanguine suo tinctis. De pellicia. De cilitio. De cuculla. De calciamento et camisia* ('Of the blood of St Thomas the martyr. Of his vestments stained with his blood. Of the cloak; of the hair-shirt; of the cowl; of the shoe and shirt'). On the other, there is an engraved image of a bishop blessing a queen who approaches him with open hands, compassed by a Latin inscription which reads in translation: 'Reginald, bishop of Bath, gives this to Margaret, queen of Sicily' (*Istud Regine Margarete Siculorum transmittit*

presul Rainaudus Batoniurum) (Fig. 2).⁵ This gift was made before 1183, for Margaret of Navarre died in that year. As Reginald is documented in Canterbury in the mid-1170s, it has been suggested that he obtained the relics then.⁶ He might just as easily have got hold of a knife associated with Becket at the same time. Of course, one should not put too much pressure on this hypothesis, for the knife may have reached Bath just as readily by some now-invisible means.

Bath's early acquisition of a Becket-relic is paralleled by evidence from other monasteries. Thus, St Augustine's abbey at Canterbury obtained relics of the saint's blood, brain, and skull by electing Roger, a monk of Christ Church Canterbury, to be their abbot in 1175.⁷ Shortly afterwards, in 1177, Benedict, the prior of Christ Church and a biographer of Becket, was elected abbot



Fig. 2 Reverse of a pendant designed to hold relics of the blood and garments of St Thomas and probably made in the 1170s. The figures represented are Reginald fitz Jocelin, bishop of Bath from 1174-91, and Margaret of Navarre, queen of Sicily (d. 1183) (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art: image in the public domain)

of Peterborough, and took with him relics of the blood ('a great quantity in two crystal vases'), shirt, cloak (or surplice: *superpellicium*), and 'two altars of stone on which the martyr was laid out', perhaps paving-stones incorporated into portable altars.⁸ A relic-list from Shrewsbury abbey, written in the late 12th century, has relics derived from nine distinct items, including a cloth stained with blood and brains and vestments Becket was wearing when murdered.⁹ There is a note stating that these things were obtained from Canterbury by an abbot whose name began with the letter A (Adam, ruled c. 1168-75, is the only possible candidate).¹⁰ At Reading abbey, some fourteen relics associated with Becket were incorporated into the relic-collection at a similarly early date, probably between 1173 and 1186.¹¹ The twelve or so Becket-related items at Waltham abbey entered that monastery in the same period: in this case, four separate donors are named in relation to the objects.¹² Ely cathedral priory was given unspecified relics of Becket by Bishop Eustache (1198-1215).¹³ A list of relics buried in January 1200 in an altar dedicated to St Stephen at a northern English monastery, quite possibly

Byland abbey, includes relics of Becket's buskins, hair-shirt, and cowl.¹⁴ And it has recently been suggested that a relic of Becket's skull recorded at Battle abbey was a gift of Odo, who was promoted to abbot there in 1175 from his former role as prior of Christ Church Canterbury.¹⁵ In this case there is no evidence, but the supposition seems reasonable enough when held beside the migration of Becket-relics to St Augustine's and Peterborough via monks of the cathedral priory elected into abbasies. Thus, even if the channel by which Becket's knife reached Bath is obscure, the fact that it did so at an early date conforms to a wider pattern of relic-distribution.

None of the examples mentioned above includes a knife of Thomas Becket, and no knife of the saint is recorded in relic-lists from Christ Church Canterbury either. However, the monks of Glastonbury possessed a knife in a coral sheath said to have belonged to Becket. This object is recorded in a list of relics inserted into the mid-14th-century chronicle of the abbey, where it crops up as part of a collection of about 20 Becket-related items: 'A knife of the same saint with a sheath of coral' (*Cultellus eiusdem cum manubrio de corallo*).¹⁶ It is not in earlier Glastonbury relic-lists, including a detailed one of the early 14th century, and may have been given by Abbot Adam of Sodbury, who reigned from 1323 to 1334 and is said in the chronicle to have given a gold ring that Becket was wearing when he was murdered.¹⁷ From a much later date comes a report of 'S. Thomas of Canterbury penneknyff and his boottes', included in a selective list of relics from the abbey of Bury St Edmunds. The list is in a letter written in 1536 by John Prise to Thomas Cromwell: the tone is jaundiced, but there is no need to doubt the existence of what it records.¹⁸ There is no other hint of this knife in surviving sources and hence no way of knowing how long the monks of Bury had possessed it. More documentation exists for a knife (*cultellum*) said to have belonged to Becket that was kept at Chartres cathedral. It is mentioned in the cathedral's cartulary in relation to a relic of the martyr's blood given by John of Salisbury when he became bishop there in 1176. The knife apparently reached Chartres earlier than this, perhaps, as has recently been speculated, during Becket's lifetime (this tends to justify the reserve expressed above about when Bath acquired its knife).¹⁹ A fourth knife associated with Becket is said to be kept in the cathedral of Vercelli in Piedmont. It is supposed to have been taken from England to Italy in the early 13th century by a papal legate. The Vercelli knife is of unusual form, with a blade that swells and tapers before terminating in a square point: scenes of the labours of the months are engraved on the handle.²⁰ It must be very doubtful that this object had anything to do with Becket historically, and the same may be true of the

other, lost, examples, including that recorded at Bath. For present purposes, however, this scruple is beside the point, and is in any case not capable of testing where the objects in question have vanished.

One naturally wants to know what kind of knife the relic at Bath was, but there can be no certainty about this. *Cultellum* (more usually *cultellus*) is a general noun which implies nothing specific about shape, use or materials. It seems reasonable to think that Becket used knives of more than one of the types mentioned below, and an example of any of these may have been regarded as a relic after his death simply by virtue of such use. In medieval England, knives were accounted for as weapons, jewels, legal proofs, relics, liturgical objects, medical instruments, and other things over and above a basic association with the table.²¹ That these categories could intersect is shown by the fact that both Westminster Abbey and St Paul's cathedral in London counted among their relics knives, or parts of knives, ascribed to Christ himself (*de cultello Domini*). Westminster also prized the knife used to disembowel St Edmund of Abingdon (archbishop of Canterbury from 1234-40) in preparation for embalming, while St Albans abbey had two large knives discovered with the relics of St Amphibalus in 1177.²² As a liturgical object, a knife was used by a priest to cut up the holy loaf, or *eulogia*, for distribution to communicants after mass as a sign of Christian community. This has been suggested as the purpose of the ornamental knife at Vercelli mentioned above, and was presumably that of the two knives, one of semi-precious stone (*de iaspide*), the other of horn, given with other liturgical objects to Canterbury cathedral priory by Hubert Walter (archbishop, 1193-1205).²³ In view of the sacredness of its function, one may care to assume that this was the type of knife represented at Bath, and for that matter at Glastonbury. As such, it would belong to a category of ritual accessories commonly associated with Becket in relic-lists, including such objects as pastoral staff, mitre, ring, chalice, and chalice cover.

In default of further evidence, these remarks would seem to exhaust what may safely be said about the relic at Bath. It would always be possible to speculate further: for example, one might guess that Glastonbury obtained its Becket-knife from Bath, and thus that the two records refer to one item. The possibility of an exchange of relics between religious institutions in south-west England, including Bath, has been mooted in the past, although the subject is poorly understood.²⁴ But this notion seems unnecessary given that Becket-knives existed in other places. For the present, and in conclusion, it is sufficient to draw attention to the evidence this record represents for Bath's early involvement in the cult of England's most famous saint.

Postscript

In an old, earnest booklet on the parish church at Widcombe, now a south-eastern suburb of Bath, William H. Devenish stated that a psalter once belonging to Thomas Becket 'came from Bath', by which he evidently meant the cathedral priory.²⁵ This psalter is also now at Corpus Christi College Cambridge (MS 411): on f. 140v there is a post-medieval inscription, reproduced by M. R. James in his catalogue of Corpus manuscripts, stating that it had been held in the hand of the saint, 'as is testified by an old writing'.²⁶ Devenish offers no grounds for his claim about provenance, but if he were correct then one would have to reckon this manuscript alongside the knife as evidence of enthusiasm for Becket at Bath. However, the claim seems to be no more than a product of wishful thinking. It may be noted that Christopher de Hamel, former Parker Librarian at Corpus Christi College, has written a book on the Becket connections of MS 411, and makes no mention of a Bath provenance.²⁷

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- ¹ The relic-lists are printed in W. Hunt (ed.), *Two Chartularies of the Priory of St. Peter at Bath* (London: Somerset Record Society, 1893), lxxv-lxxvi: here, too, their derivation from Corpus Christi MS 140 is noted (lxxvi, note). Further on this derivation see M. R. James, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in Corpus Christi College*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1912), i, 236, who provides a diagram showing the place of pp. 7, 8 in their quire, and the fact that they comprise a singleton rather than one half of a bifolium. The Bath lists are selectively discussed in I. G. Thomas, 'The Cult of Saints' Relics in Medieval England' (PhD thesis, University of London, 1974), 51-6.
- ² The manuscript is paginated rather than foliated.
- ³ Compare Thomas, *op. cit.* note 1, 53.
- ⁴ Thomas, *op. cit.* note 1, 52.
- ⁵ T. P. F. Hoving, 'A Newly Discovered Reliquary of St. Thomas Becket', *Gesta* 4 (1965), 28-30; M. Bagnoli *et al.* (eds), *Treasures from Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (London: The British Museum, 2011), 186-7; R. Koopmans, 'Thomas Becket and the Royal Abbey of Reading', *English Hist. Rev.* 131 (2016), 22.
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- ⁷ Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 189, f. 68v; A. H. Davis (trans.), *William Thorne's Chronicle of Saint Augustine's Abbey Canterbury* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1934), 100.
- ⁸ J. Sparke (ed.), *Historiae coenobii Burgensis scriptores varii* (London, 1727), 101; also E. King, 'Benedict of Peterborough and the Cult of Thomas Becket', *Northamptonshire Past and Present* 9 (1996-97), 213-20; P. Fergusson, 'Architecture during

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- ¹⁰ Cf. Thomas, *op. cit.* note 1, 229.
- ¹¹ Koopmans, *op. cit.* note 5, 23 and 1-30 *passim*.
- ¹² N. Rogers, 'The Waltham Abbey Relic-List', in C. Hicks (ed.), *England in the Eleventh Century: Proceedings of the 1990 Harlaxton Symposium* (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1992), 168, 173, 178, 179, 181.
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- ¹⁵ M. Carter, 'The Relics of Battle Abbey: A Fifteenth-Century Inventory at the Huntington Library, San Marino', *J. Med. Monastic Stud.* 8 (2019), 317-18, 338.
- ¹⁶ J. P. Carley (ed.), *The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey*, trans. D. Townsend (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1985), 26-27.
- ¹⁷ Carley, *op. cit.* note 16, 260-1.
- ¹⁸ T. Wright (ed.), *Three Chapters of Letters Relating to the Suppression of Monasteries* (London, 1843), 85.
- ¹⁹ K. Bollermann and C. J. Nederman, 'The "Sunset Years": John of Salisbury as Bishop of Chartres and the Emergent Cult of St. Thomas Becket in France', *Viator* 45 (2014), 69-71 and 55-76 *passim*.
- ²⁰ See D. Rock, *The Church of Our Fathers*, rev. edn, 4 vols (London, 1904-05), i, 110-11.
- ²¹ See e.g. O. Lehmann-Brockhaus (ed.), *Lateinische Schriftquellen zur Kunst in England, Wales und Schottland vom Jahre 901 bis zum Jahre 1307*, 5 vols (Munich: Prestel, 1955-60), i, nos 76, 199, 231, 468, 857, 1563; ii, nos 2314, 2514, 2517, 2613, 2970, 3029, 3299, 3483, 3493, 3874, 3948, 4023, 4624; iii, nos 5744, 6092, 6267, 6283, 6543, 6557, 6726, 6743, 6755; M. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*, 3rd edn (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 38-41, 158, 256, 260-61; pl. 5.
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