

## Review

# Thomas Becket: Murder and the Making of a Saint, British Museum, 20 May–22 August 2021

Tom Nickson

The Courtauld Institute of Art, Strand, London WC2R 0RN, UK; tom.nickson@courtauld.ac.uk

**Abstract:** This review considers the British Museum's exhibition, *Thomas Becket: Murder and the Making of a Saint*, curated by Lloyd de Beer and Naomi Speakman. Following a brief description of the show and its relationship to current art-historical scholarship, I offer a detailed study of one exhibit, a late-twelfth-century font from Lyngsjö in Sweden, and briefly sketch the significance of Becket for the historiography of medieval art in Britain.

**Keywords:** Thomas Becket; exhibition; British Museum; medieval art; Lyngsjö font; Tancred Borenius



**Citation:** Nickson, Tom. 2021. Thomas Becket: Murder and the Making of a Saint, British Museum, 20 May–22 August 2021. *Arts* 10: 54. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts10030054>

Academic Editors: Carles Sánchez Márquez and Michelle Facos

Received: 1 July 2021  
Accepted: 6 August 2021  
Published: 10 August 2021

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

*Thomas Becket: Murder and the Making of a Saint* opened at the British Museum in May 2021 to justifiably enthusiastic reviews in the popular press. Jonathan Jones of *The Guardian* gave it a five-star review, noting that ‘Suddenly the art of that faraway time seems brutally contemporary’ (Jones 2021). Resonances with the fraught events of 2020/2021 have indeed been widely recognized, from political turmoil in the US and UK to the horrors of the COVID-19 pandemic and the hopes invested in tiny vials of healing liquid. Instead of commemorating the anniversaries of Becket's death and translation, the exhibition's delayed opening now coincides appropriately with the re-opening in Easter 1171 of Canterbury cathedral, ‘locked down’ following Becket's death in December 1170. Those unable to travel to the exhibition have been able to make a kind of virtual pilgrimage there thanks to a series of extremely successful online lectures and curators' tours that will, one suspects, help to reshape future thinking about how museums can expand their reach.

## 1. Murder and the Making of a Saint

The exhibition begins with the Victoria & Albert Museum's dazzling Becket casket. Measuring 295 mm × 344 mm × 124 mm and generally dated to the 1180s, this is the largest and perhaps earliest of over 50 surviving enamel reliquary caskets showing Thomas's martyrdom and burial. It thus focuses attention on two key themes of the exhibition: the story of Becket's murder and his transformation into a saint. Six sections follow, many of which include several smaller themed displays. ‘The rise and fall of Thomas Becket’, the most congested part of the exhibition, begins with objects from ‘Becket's London’ and then traces his career ‘from clerk to courtier’, culminating in the great waterworks plan of Canterbury cathedral from the Eadwine Psalter. ‘Archbishop and exile’ displays objects associated with episcopal patrons in twelfth-century England, including a copy of the Gospels that once belonged to Becket, while the Becket Leaves from a dismantled Life of St Thomas are the star attraction of ‘Divided loyalties’.

Just one object is displayed in the second section, ‘Murder in the cathedral’. This is the British Library's copy of Alan of Tewkesbury's collection of Becket's letters, opened to show a letter from John of Salisbury that describes Becket's murder and the miracles that followed, illustrated by what may be one of the earliest representations of the martyrdom. A short animation in the same room offers a modern version of the story without distracting from the medieval objects. ‘The making of a saint’, the third section, begins with ‘The aftermath’ and a display of manuscripts and seals that draws attention to the role of the Plantagenets in rapidly disseminating Becket's cult across Europe. This spread is represented by several ampullae and caskets but is dominated by a wonderful font from

Lyngsjö in Sweden (discussed below). A collection of objects related to the Translation in 1220 returns the focus to Canterbury and to the exhibition's great highlight, the fifth miracle window from Canterbury cathedral's Trinity Chapel, newly restored and reassembled for the exhibition. Here, viewers can admire the extraordinary storytelling at eye-level in a manner impossible in Canterbury cathedral and are rewarded with all manner of details, from the striking marble effects on Becket's tomb to a vicious scene of castration. The display and labels profit from recent research on the glass by Rachel Koopmans and Leonie Seliger, though diagrams might be helpful here in distinguishing between original glass and later replacements, which are often of a very high quality. On the wall opposite, a huge but somewhat faint photo of the Trinity Chapel evokes the architectural setting of the shrine and windows.

'Pilgrimage and devotion' is less tightly focused than the earlier sections. In one corner, a large marble capital, probably from Becket's shrine, is placed next to a recent digital reconstruction of that shrine, while a display dedicated to 'Chaucer and pilgrimage' brings together Chaucerian manuscripts with a wide variety of pilgrim badges and small-scale objects. The penultimate section, 'Becket and the Tudors', shows how Henry VIII at first embraced Becket's cult and then condemned it. In one manuscript, prayers to Thomas have been removed but not the accompanying images; in another, Becket's image is crossed out but still clearly visible; in a third, ink has been smeared across the entire page, creating a striking sea of red, punctuated by golden initials. However, it is a particular strength of this exhibition that the Reformation is not portrayed as the endpoint of devotion to Becket, and a case entitled 'Martyrdom and memory' shows how Thomas's memory resonated afresh in disputes between the English Crown and Catholic communities in sixteenth-century England. The exhibition ends with a flourish with Henri de Flemalle's large Baroque sculpture of Becket with a sword wedged in his head, his cope originally held in place by a large morse containing a relic of his skull.

## 2. Between Spectacle and History

Capitalising on the interest and events associated with significant anniversaries (already shown by the British Library's 2015 *Magna Carta* exhibition), the Thomas Becket exhibition benefits from stunning objects and a compelling story, parts of it already familiar to many. As with the British Museum's *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe* exhibition (2015), there have even been reports of visitors kissing display cases out of reverence for their contents. Although religion and devotion are necessarily prominent, there is little emphasis on piety. Becket's own seal, possibly impressed with his fingerprints, is offered as a kind of modern contact relic, but a psalter now in the library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, once thought to have belonged to St Thomas, is presented as a relic of belief, not of Becket. Miracles from one of the windows at Canterbury are presented in an appropriately Chaucerian spirit, inviting viewers to relish stories of nose bleeds, sibling rivalry, castration and cure. Eilward of Westoning may point to his miraculously restored eyesight, but his audience seems more interested in his genitals, their return to rude health signalled by the tree that sprouts proudly behind him whilst an onlooker rummages in a suspiciously scrotal sack of money. The marvellous Becket Leaves also provide an injection of humour, underlining Becket's worldliness rather than his saintliness. The image of Becket stabbed in the back on a case for surgical instruments should also be understood as a witticism. Loaned by The Worshipful Company of Barbers, it presumably represents the kind of gallows humour and love of high-tech gadgetry still associated with high-performing surgeons.

The exhibition also hints at shifts in the discipline of Art History. In the very first section, devoted to Becket's life, the curators include gaming pieces and animal bones repurposed as ice skates, offering a more expansive view of London's material culture than might be offered in traditional art histories or at institutions such as the V&A. The skates' inclusion is justified by the extraordinary description of medieval London in William Fitzstephen's *Life of Becket*, which also celebrates various luxury goods from around the

world, all traded in London. A bronze dish, made either in England or Germany, shows Thomas the Apostle's mission to India and discreetly acknowledges the importance of an increasingly global Art History, while the Museum of London's twelfth-century Sabbath lamp signals London's long-standing cosmopolitanism.

A section on the rapid spread of Becket's cult across Europe ensures that he is not co-opted as some kind of national hero for Brexit Britain, although this section suffers most from financial and practical constraints in terms of loans. A reliquary pendant with Queen Margaret of Sicily and Bishop Reginald of Bath, exhibited in *English Romanesque Art 1066–1200* (Hayward Gallery 1984), *Treasures of Heaven* and the British Museum's *Sicily: Culture and Conquest* exhibition (2016) is one of several objects from the Metropolitan Museum in New York that could not travel for the exhibition (all are conveniently visible on the Met's website). These include a curious enamel reliquary casket, not quite like any other from the period; a remarkable ivory comb that shows Henry naming Becket as archbishop on one side and his martyrdom on the other; a large copper reliquary casket with Becket alongside other Canterbury/English saints, probably made for Canterbury itself; a pilgrim's badge showing Becket's shrine, better preserved than the Museum of London's version; and a truly extraordinary ivory showing the martyrdom below a finely carved architectural canopy, one of the finest of a small group of openwork ivories in New York, London and elsewhere (Little 2014, p. 25). Yet after months of lockdown, visitors are unlikely to complain about these absences, especially given the dire consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for museum finances.

### 3. Becket in Scandinavia

Two spectacular objects speak to the reach of Becket's cult in Scandinavia, sustained by long-standing institutional ties with the English Church. Neither has travelled for exhibitions hitherto. A golden reliquary from Hedalen Stave Church represents a Norwegian translation of the enamel caskets that were made to contain Becket's relics and spread across Europe in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century. Instead of enamel, the narratives are here rendered in low relief, and the casket's gables are ornamented with open-mouthed dragons' heads of the kind found on contemporaneous Stave churches (a casket from Trönö Old Church in Sweden represents an intermediate phase, with dragons' heads added to an enamel casket). To the right of the martyrdom on the Hedalen casket, a dove dive-bombs a large chalice on the altar, an unusual iconography that perhaps draws inspiration from the Icelandic *Thomas Sága*, in which, after Becket's death, his blood and brains were carried to the altar in a chalice where 'the Holy Ghost descended down upon it in the likeness of a dove' (Magnússon 1875–1883, vol. 1, pp. 552–53; Duggan 2020, pp. 11–16). The *Thomas Sága* is also the only written source that describes Edward Grim holding the cross next to Becket, as depicted here, but as this detail is also prominent in many English representations of the martyrdom, Anne Duggan suggests it may have featured in the lost *Vita* by Robert of Cricklade (died before 1174), on which the *Sága* is partly based.

The second highlight is a font from Lyngsjö in Skåne, now in southern Sweden but formerly in Denmark. It was possibly carved, in part, by the same Tove who signed a similar font in the nearby church of Gumlösa, consecrated in 1191. In the scene of martyrdom on the Lyngsjö font, three knights attack Becket while a fourth takes orders from King Henry, conspicuously labelled, his crossed feet pushing beyond the frame. As on the Hedalen casket, Grim holds the cross, while a dove descends upon the chalice on the altar (Figure 1).

Other scenes on the font inflect readings of this iconography, namely the Baptism of Christ, the Coronation of the Virgin, the *Traditio legis*, and Doubting Thomas (Figure 2). A series of visual rhymes suggests this is not just a random collection of scenes. Except in the martyrdom scene, the halo of each figure perfectly fits below the framing arcade. Scrolls are unusually prominent, though only Henry II's is inscribed. The raised arm of John the Baptist is mirrored by Christ in the Coronation of the Virgin and in Doubting Thomas; the arm of Doubting Thomas is itself echoed by that of the Virgin in the Coronation and Christ in the Baptism and contrasts with the gesture of Henry II as he directs the knight. A dove

flies down from the rim of the font at the Baptism, a smaller version of that found in the martyrdom scene. Baptism and the related themes of anointing, coronation and martyrdom are clearly appropriate for a font, and were presumably once enhanced by red and green paint, of which significant traces remain. But how exactly do the monstrous figures on the base contrast with the solemn scenes above? The pairing of the two Thomases is not unprecedented, but why are they both shown here?



**Figure 1.** Baptismal font from Lyngsjö Church, Sweden. Detail of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket. Limestone. Height 785 mm. Width (bowl) 690 mm. © the Author.



**Figure 2.** Baptismal font from Lyngsjö Church, Sweden. Detail of the Coronation of the Virgin and Baptism of Christ. © the Author.

Some explanation for this iconography may lie with the career of Absalon, Archbishop of Lund (d. 1201), who, in 1191, consecrated the church of Gumlösa near Lyngsjö. In June 1170, as Bishop of Roskilde, he had assisted in the coronation and anointing of Knut VI as co-regent of Denmark, the first ceremony of its kind there. Appointed Archbishop of Lund in 1177/8, Absalon claimed the right to oversee future coronations, defended



the kings of Denmark against imperial pretensions, forced through church reforms in Skåne and continued efforts to convert and subdue the Wends across the Baltic (Vogt 2015). These activities—many recorded in Saxo Grammaticus’ *Gesta Danorum*, commissioned by Absalon—resonate with several scenes on the font, including the *Traditio legis*, long associated with conversion. It is perhaps significant that in two late additions to his *Miracula*, penned c. 1177, William of Canterbury recounts the miraculous cure of a canon of Lund and another miracle in which Thomas is made a hero of expeditions against the Wends (Robertson and Sheppard 1875–1885, vol. 1, pp. 543–45). The imagery suggests that not only were artists combining visual and textual sources to adapt the still-new iconography of Becket’s martyrdom, but also that they were capable, from a very early date, of reframing Becket’s story in terms relevant to biblical and contemporary history.

#### 4. Becket in the History of Art

Many will know the Lyngsjö font only from Tancred Borenius’s classic study, *St. Thomas Becket in Art*, which nearly a hundred years ago gathered together almost all the objects included in this exhibition (Borenius 1932). More deserves to be said about Borenius’s methods and wide-ranging scholarship, his friendship with Roger Fry, his heroic war record and much more. His study of Becket belongs to a broader re-evaluation of English medieval art in the 1920s and 1930s, one that reached its apogee in the vast but now largely forgotten *Exhibition of English Mediaeval Art* at the V&A in 1930, where over 1100 objects were shown. However, scholarly interest in the art of Thomas Becket extends back deep into the eighteenth century, when the V&A’s Becket casket was discovered in Hall Palace in St Neots, Cambridgeshire, long the home of a Catholic family. It was shown to the antiquarian William Stukeley, who subsequently exhibited it at a meeting of the Royal Society and published his commentary on it in the Society’s *Philosophical Transactions* in 1748, accompanied by two engravings by James Mynde (Stukeley 1748). Stukeley believed it came from nearby Crowland Abbey and showed the martyrdom of abbot Theodore, and ‘from the Manner of drawing, and Workmanship’, he considered it Saxon. However erroneous, Stukeley’s iconographic, stylistic and technical analysis of the casket underlines the significance of such objects to the early history of antiquarianism and, one might even say, to the history of Art History in Britain (see Snape 2013). Indeed, for many of the antiquarians who first studied them, the objects shown in this wonderful exhibition represented more reliable witnesses to England’s medieval history than the monastic chronicles that were thought to be tainted by association with the Catholic Church.

Like Stukeley’s commentary, *Thomas Becket: Murder and the Making of a Saint* will be remembered for many years to come because it is ‘preserved’ in print (De Beer and Speakman 2021); indeed, the book that accompanies the exhibition represents an especially impressive achievement given the COVID-19 pandemic, closure of libraries and furloughing of curators for several months. As is now quite common, the book does not provide detailed catalogue entries for each item, but it locates exhibits in a broader visual and historical context than could be done in the exhibition and provides an up-to-date, highly readable and lavishly illustrated text that will finally supplant Borenius’s book as the definitive account of the art of Thomas Becket. If the show also persuades the British Museum to support further exhibitions of medieval art, then that, too, will constitute a valuable legacy.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Acknowledgments:** I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewers for their comments and to my MA students, who discussed the font with me.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

#### References

- Borenius, Tancred. 1932. *St. Thomas Becket in Art*. London: Methuen.
- De Beer, Lloyd, and Naomi Speakman. 2021. *Thomas Becket: Murder and the Making of a Saint*. London: The British Museum Press.

- Duggan, Anne J. 2020. Becket's Cap and the Broken Sword. Jacques de Vitry's English Mitre in Context. *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 173: 3–25. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Jones, Jonathan. 2021. A spectacular gorefest—Thomas Becket: Murder and the Making of a Saint review. *The Guardian*, May 13.
- Little, Charles T. 2014. The Art of Gothic Ivories: Studies at the Crossroads. *The Sculpture Journal* 31: 13–29. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Magnússon, Eiríkr. 1875–1883. *Thómas Saga Erkebyskups: A Life of Archbishop Thomas Becket in Icelandic*. London: Longmans & Co., vol. 2.
- Robertson, James, and Joseph Sheppard. 1875–1885. *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*. London: Longman, vol. 7.
- Snape, Julia. 2013. Medieval Art on Display 1750–2010. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK.
- Stukeley, William. 1748. An Account of an Antient Shrine, Formerly Belonging to the Abbey of Croyland. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 45: 579–81.
- Vogt, Helle. 2015. Absalon: Évêque, guerrier et le Richelieu du Danemark. In *Autor de Lanfrance (1010–2010)*; Edited by Julia Barrow, Fabrice Delivré and Véronique Gazeau. Caen: PUC, pp. 329–42.