

A PAINTED TRAGEDY

THE MARTYRDOM OF THOMAS BECKET IN SANTA MARIA DE TERRASSA
AND THE DIFFUSION OF ITS CULT IN THE IBERIAN PENINSULA



Carles Sánchez Márquez

anem

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OF ITS CULT IN THE IBERIAN PENINSULA

Translation by Bàrbara Schmitt Solà

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*A painted tragedy.
The martyrdom of Thomas Becket in Santa Maria de Terrassa
and the diffusion of its cult in the Iberian Peninsula*

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For Siena, Nicola and Queralt

Have you come to kill me? I have handed over my cause to the Supreme Judge, so I am not afraid of your threats. My soul is as prepared for martyrdom as your swords to attack.

THOMAS BECKET (1118-1170)

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TERRASSA AND BECKET ON THE 850TH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH

In 2020 England commemorated the 850th anniversary of the murder of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral. This distant episode that shook Europe reminds us how the turmoils of the history of the British Isles have affected and still affect the future of Europe.

Who would have thought, in the presence of the misty and rainy landscape that surrounds the imposing mass of Canterbury Cathedral, that the events that took place at dusk on December 29, 1170 would have such an important significance for all of Western Christianity? The tragic death of Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, at the hands of trusted men of Henry II Plantagenet, became a symbol for the Church's struggle to maintain its independence from secular power, but also a lasting reminder of the Archbishop's saintliness, as his biographers considered him an *alter Christus*.

Carles Sánchez' book takes us to this troubled chapter of European history at the last third of the twelfth century through the surprising cycle of wall paintings at Santa Maria de Terrassa, dedicated to the death and sanctification of Thomas Becket. Discovered in 1917, at first the paintings caught the interest of Josep Soler i Palet, Josep Puig i Cadafalch and Josep Gudiol. More recently, scholars such as Milagros Guardia, Gregoria Caveró, Etelvina Fernández, Fernando Galván Fraile and Ana Suárez have dedicated a series of research to the cult of Thomas Becket in the Iberian Peninsula, including the analysis of the paintings in Terrassa. And, since 2014, Carles Sánchez has made significant contributions to the knowledge about the paintings which he now presents in this book.

Thanks to the author's active participation in the research project of the Autonomous University of Barcelona *Artists, Patrons and Audiences. Catalonia and the Mediterranean (11th-15th centuries)*-MAGISTRI CATALONIAE (MICINN HAR2011-23015), since 2014, professor Sánchez was able to apply a new methodology of work to the paintings. It is based on a systematic study of the agents implicated in the completion of a work of art, especially the combined action of the patrons and the artist in the conception and realisation of the set within the exercise of their different roles as *auctor intellectualis* or *auctor materialis*. In addition, the project gave Sánchez access to the pioneering results of the paintings' analysis by Judit Verdaguer and María José Alcayde, thanks to the collaboration between the Museum of Terrassa, Vic Episcopal Museum, Heritage Restoration Centre of Catalonia and GRAPAC/CETEC-Patrimoni, on the occasion of the exhibition *Painting a thousand years ago. Romanesque colours* (Vic Episcopal Museum, May 31 to December 14, 2014) and the publication of *Pintar fa mil anys. Els colors i l'ofici del pintor romànic* (UAB, 2014).

Carles Sánchez' earlier conclusions, published in two articles in 2014, already introduced important new data which he revises and expands with new information in this book. First, the dedication and decoration of a chapel to Thomas Becket, on the south side of the transept of Santa Maria de Terrassa, cannot be considered merely as another example of the early propagation of his cult in Europe, but as a deliberate choice made by the Terrassa community of St. Augustine canons —attached to Saint-Ruf at Avignon— that governed the building. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the chapel is located between the canons' quarters and the main altar of the church, a place of required and frequent passing and, hence, at the cultural centre of the community's life. It is likely that the decision was directly related to the presence of Harvey, a priest and canon from Saint-Ruf at Avignon, of Anglo-Norman origin, and documented as a scribe at the priory of Terrassa in the second half of the twelfth century. The author places the execution of the wall paintings in the third period of Harvey's activities as scribe (1184-

1186), at the same time when a certain Reginald, probably also of English origin, is documented as prior.

Secondly, these English connections, which are fundamental for understanding the quick reception of the Becket cult in the Crown of Aragon, were rooted in the endeavours that abbot Nicholas Breakspear of Saint-Ruf at Avignon, future Pope Adrian IV, undertook south of the Pyrenees some years earlier. And, also, in the well-established alliance between Ramon Berenguer IV and Henry II Plantagenet, as demonstrated by the fact that the count of Barcelona and Prince of Aragon nominated the King of England protector of his children in his will.

Third and last, Carles Sánchez' study confirms the attribution of the paintings to the same artist who created the altar frontal of Espinelves (c. 1187), currently preserved at the Vic Episcopal Museum, to whom he also attributes a fragment of the mural painting from Vic Cathedral. This would have been, then, a painter with a *curriculum vitae* well established in Catalan Romanesque painting, proficient in the techniques of panel painting as well as mural painting, and who did not hesitate to use the procedure of one for the other, as demonstrated by the use of tinfoil and mecca gilding in the paintings of Terrassa.

In conclusion, this book is a genuine contribution to the study of the pictorial cycle of St. Thomas Becket in Terrassa and, by extension, to the analysis of the propagation of his cult in the Iberian Peninsula. This is one of the oldest frescoes representing Becket's martyrdom preserved in Europe and also one of the earliest hagiographic apses in Catalan mural painting. So, first of all this work emphasises the value of Catalan Romanesque painting which counts few monographs focusing on a single work of art. Secondly, this book might be destined to become one of the more significant scientific contributions to the commemorative events of the 850th anniversary of the assassination of Thomas Becket. And, thirdly, we trust that it will become another reason for the recognition of the singularity of the monumental pictorial ensemble of the churches of Terrassa because, since October 26, 2018, the See of Egara is included in the

UNESCO World Heritage Tentative list. Books like this, written with effort, determination and vision for the future, show that research continues and how necessary it is in order to move forward in the knowledge of our monuments and in their revaluation as heritage.

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INTRODUCTION

A MARTYR FOR THE FREEDOM OF THE CHURCH

The murder of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, on December 29, 1170, by four nobles from the royal circle of Henry II of England, is one of the most striking episodes of the European Middle Ages. The virulence of the crime, the miraculous events that took place around his tomb and the canonization of Becket by Pope Alexander III in March 1173, turned the Saint into an object of great devotion. Miracles and pilgrims made Canterbury one of the most important pilgrimage centres in all of Christendom, almost as popular as Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostela and Rome.¹

The tragedy of Canterbury Cathedral was the culmination of a dispute between Thomas Becket and Henry II that lasted from 1162 to 1170. A tragic outcome of a volatile relationship that went from friendship to direct confrontation, and that culminated in a heroic death. The reason for the dispute: the ideological discussion between temporal and spiritual power. A battle defending the freedom of the Church of England against ecclesiastical control by the monarchy.

The murder of Becket is one of the best documented chapters in the history of the Middle Ages. Abundant texts, which allow us to reconstruct the facts of Canterbury with precision, contributed to the propagation of the cult. In this sense, sources can be classified into three groups according to their typology. First, we have numerous biographies written by eyewitnesses to the assassination of the Archbishop of Canterbury.² The *Vitae* written by John of Salisbury, an ally of Becket and one of the most prominent intellectuals of his time; William FitzStephen, secretary of Becket; Herbert of Bosham, friend and companion in exile; and Edward Grim, a clergyman from

Cambridgeshire who tried to protect the Archbishop on the night of the assassination. In fact, as we will see, Grim's act of prowess in front of the assailants gave him a leading place in the story, which is why his presence is common in the iconographic sequences of Becket's martyrdom.

Secondly, we have to take into account the collection of miracles, compiled by the monks William of Canterbury and Benedict of Peterborough. The latter —a monk of Christ Church and prior of Holy Trinity, Canterbury (1175-1177)— was the first custodian of Becket's tomb and based his book of miracles on interviews with the pilgrims.³ Finally, there is Becket's epistolary collection, which allows us an accurate reconstruction of his turbulent years as archbishop (1160-1170).⁴ Thanks to these sources we have more information on Becket's life than on any other saint of the Middle Ages.

Thomas Becket was born into a family of Norman merchants in London in 1118. Between 1130 and 1141 he was educated at the school of the Augustinian priory of Merton (Surrey) with regular canons, and later studied grammar in London, probably at St. Paul's. The Merton Priory was founded in 1114 and its school became one of the most important educational centres in England. It was also where another English clergyman was educated, one who would have an even brighter career than Becket: Nicholas Breakspear, who became Pope under the name of Adrian IV (1154-1159).⁵ Becket always kept a fond memory of Merton and even helped the Augustinian priory during his time as chancellor of King Henry II.

After this first period of education, at the age of 21 Becket began working as an accountant for Osbert Huitdeniers, a London banker related to the city's financial market. Later, in 1142, he entered the service of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury as secretary. Probably, his father Gilbert's contacts with people around Theobald, also of Norman origin, made his son's leap from the financial world to the archbishopric possible. According to the *Vita* written by William FitzStephen, Theobald sent Becket to study Roman and Canon law in Bologna and Auxerre and later appointed him archdeacon of Canterbury (1154).⁶

Becket's temperance and *savoir-faire* during his time as archdeacon under the rule of Theobald caught the attention of the King of England. Henry II appointed him Lord Chancellor at the end of 1155 and Becket became one of his most faithful advisers. It should be emphasised that the Lord Chancellor was one of the king's most important servants who sometimes acted on his behalf. In addition, the Chancellor was in charge of the Royal Chapel, of the court's religious services, the chancery and royal archives. He travelled frequently with the king and his court, with whom he maintained strong personal bonds.

Becket's administrative qualities as the new chancellor, along with his charisma, taste for hunting, fishing and the order of chivalry—avocations he shared with Henry II—led him to gain the monarch's affection with whom he developed a close friendship. As chancellor, he carried out notable representative tasks, such as the embassy before the King of France, Louis VII (1158), and especially the siege of Toulouse, in which he led the Royal Army (1159). Interestingly, Henry II received the support of the Count of Barcelona and Prince of Aragon, Ramon Berenguer IV, in Toulouse, with whom he established a political and military alliance. As we will see, in his sacramental will Ramon Berenguer IV entrusted the tutelage of his eldest son, future king Alfonso II the Troubadour, to the English monarch, which proves the good relationship and ties between the two rulers.

The most obvious act of the King's esteem for his Chancellor took place in 1162, when the monarch granted the episcopate of Canterbury to Becket in order to guarantee this institution's unconditional support and compliance with his own interests. With this intention, Thomas was ordained as priest on June 2 and received the Canterbury mitre the next day. Paradoxically, the episcopal coronation would represent an unexpected turn in the relationship between Becket and the King and, notably, the beginning of a crisis without precedents between the Church and the English Crown. From his closeness to the Monarch, as friend and faithful counsellor of the court, the newly appointed Archbishop turned to absolute opposition and into an advocate for the English clergy and for the inde-

pendence of Canterbury. Once Archbishop, Becket started to protect the rights of the Church with the same vehemence with which he had defended the power of the King.

Strictly speaking, there were two immediate causes that lead to this direct confrontation. The first was of financial nature: As archbishop, Becket began to assert lands and tithes that had been usurped from Canterbury Cathedral, claims that earned him the enmity of the nobility and the King. The second cause was ecclesiastical justice and Becket's refusal to accept the old customs of the kingdom. Henry II claimed that these customs required that a criminal clergyman be tried by a secular court, from where he would be transferred to an ecclesiastical court. The Monarch considered that clergy who committed secular crimes were judged too leniently by the courts of the Church and should receive punishment by the secular power. In this way, he wanted to impose his jurisdiction over any other legal system and exercise direct control over the clergy.

The controversy reached its culmination with the Constitutions of Clarendon, which Henry II imposed on Becket in January 1164. The Archbishop of Canterbury and the clergy of his circle rejected some of the Constitutions' articles, specifically those which diminished the Church's jurisdiction in benefit of that of the King: accused clergy were to appear before a royal court, which would decide on the ecclesiastical nature of the case; consequently, a guilty clergyman could be defrocked and sentenced as a layman (article 3); bishops needed the King's approval to excommunicate the monarch's tenant lords and royal servants (art.7); the King reserved for him most of the income of vacant episcopal sees and abbeys, the holders of which would be appointed by his consent (art.12). In short, these articles implied a return to the old customs of the kingdom, which restricted the privileges of the Church and limited the power of ecclesiastical justice. The conflict between post-Gregorian authority and the centralizing monarchy was therefore inevitable.

But the clash between Henry II and the Archbishop of Canterbury needs to be considered in a broader context. Their dispute is a small-scale reflection of the conflict sustained between the Pon-

tificate and the Holy Roman Empire in the twelfth century, characterized by the struggle over the primacy of secular power, between Popes Adrian IV (1154-1159) and Alexander III (1159-1181) and the Germanic Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (1152-1190). Frederick I aspired to become the highest authority in Western Europe, while the Church sought independence from secular power and to maintain the pontifical theocracy. When Pope Adrian IV died in 1159, clashes between rival cardinal sectors promoted the appointment of an antipope, Victor IV, and a pope, Alexander III. Aiming to destabilise the pontificate of Alexander III, Emperor Frederick I tried to extend Antipope Victor IV's obedience and to get Henry II to abandon Roman obedience. To the contrary, the Church of England supported Henry II, who sided with Pope Alexander III at the Council of London in 1160, as did the French monarchy.

When condemned for his rebellion at a great council at Northampton Castle (October 8, 1164) and sentenced to lose all his properties in favour of the King, Becket was forced to seek exile outside the territories of the House of Plantagenet. Thanks to the mediation of Pope Alexander III, he first took refuge in the Cistercian Abbey of Pontigny from 1164 to 1170, and later was taken in at the Benedictine community of St. Colomba in Sens (France). In 1166, the Pope endorsed the Archbishop's cause, nominating him papal legate to England and excommunicating all laity and clergy who had accepted the Constitutions of Clarendon. In fact, Becket also enjoyed the protection of the King of France, Louis VII, in dispute with Henry II over the Plantagenet dominions that threatened the former's kingdom.⁷ It should be remembered that after the annulment of her marriage to Louis VII, Eleanor of Aquitaine married Henry II of England on May 18, 1152. With this union, Eleanor joined her domains of the Duchy of Aquitaine with those already in the possession of the heir of the Crown of England (Anjou, Maine, Normandy and the kingdoms of England and Wales), leading to the creation of the Plantagenet empire.

After the first attempt at a truce between the King and Becket had failed at Montmartre on November 18, 1169, negotiations fi-

nally culminated in the reconciliation of Fréteval on July 22, 1170. Thomas agreed to return to England on December 1 of the same year. However, once in Canterbury, where his followers greeted him with great enthusiasm, Becket maintained his uncompromising attitude and excommunicated the bishops of London and Salisbury who had not supported him in his fight against the King. In fact, previously he had excommunicated other clergy members who had attended the coronation of the King's eldest son, Henry, as young king (*rex iunior*) in the Spring of 1170.

According to the *Vita* written by Edward Grim, as a result of Becket's ingratitude, Henry II uttered the words that precipitated the tragic outcome: «What miserable traitors I have fed and educated in my home, who let their Lord be treated with this shameful contempt by a clergyman!» Four knights of Henry II's royal circle —William de Tracy, Reginald FitzUrse, Hugh de Morville, and Richard le Breton— took the monarch's words literally. The assailants arrived at the episcopal palace where they had a first interview with Becket, asking him to lift the excommunication against the bishops who had participated in the coronation of Henry the Young King. When he refused, they accused the Archbishop of treason.

Shortly afterwards, the four men returned armed to the cathedral where the monks were preparing the evening service. They persecuted Becket and his clergy from the cloister to the transept and demanded again that the Archbishop lift the excommunications. Thomas refused and a struggle ensued: they beat him to death.

The violence of the murder, the miracles that took place at his tomb and the fast circulation of the *Vita* and *Miracula* contributed to the propagation of the cult of St. Thomas Becket which extended beyond the borders of England.⁸ Proof of this are the numerous churches, chapels, altars and hospices dedicated to him throughout Christendom from the date of his canonization in 1173 until the relocation of his remains to Trinity Chapel of Canterbury Cathedral in 1220.

Henry II himself contributed to the popularity of the cult when, after his public penance at Becket's tomb on July 12, 1174, he en-

couraged the veneration of the martyr to establish quickly in his daughters' realms: the kingdoms of Castile and Sicily and the Duchy of Saxony.⁹

As we want to show in the following pages, in the territories of the Crown of Aragon, the dissemination of the cult was closely related to the role of the Augustinian houses, especially those attached to the congregation of Saint-Ruf in Provence, which became one of the main agents of spreading the episode through manuscripts of the life and miracles, but also through monumental works of art such as the pictorial cycle of Terrassa.

In the case of the Crown of Aragon we have two precedents that surely contributed to creating a favourable context for the surprising veneration of the English martyr: on the one hand, the relationship established between Catalonia and England since the middle of the twelfth century through the abbot of Saint-Ruf, Nicholas Breakspear. In 1148, a few years before he was appointed Pope as Adrian IV, he took part in the siege of Tortosa (Catalonia) as a papal legate. On the other hand, the agreements between Ramon Berenguer IV and Henry II of England, which resulted in an important alliance in the siege of Toulouse.

In conclusion, the death of Thomas Becket became a symbol of the Church's cause against secular power. The violent nature of the assassination—a clergy man murdered brutally inside a cathedral—turned his martyrdom into an iconic image of the struggle between Church and State, between royal and ecclesiastical justice.

The memory of the Archbishop of Canterbury was still subject of political debate in the sixteenth century, as evidenced by the instructions of Henry VIII (1509-1547) who, following the King's rupture with Rome, ordered Becket's relics to be destroyed and suppressed any vestiges of his cult.

The murder of the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket in 1170 at the hands of trusted men of King Henry II of England had a huge impact on twelfth-century Europe. His violent death was the tragic outcome of a far-reaching conflict between the secular power of European feudal monarchies and the spiritual power of the Church. Following the events, the figure of Becket achieved great notoriety and his cult spread everywhere, also in the Iberian Peninsula, where we find texts and works of art commemorating his martyrdom and sanctification, like the wall paintings of Santa Maria de Terrassa (c. 1180). *A painted tragedy* unfolds the dissemination of the Thomas Becket cult and illustrates the relations between England and the Iberian Peninsula eight hundred and fifty years ago. Why did Ramon Berenguer IV entrust his children's guardianship to the King of England? Did Eleanor Plantagenet, daughter of Henry II, play an active role in promoting the Becket cult in the kingdom of Castile? Was the presence of an English canon named Harvey in Santa Maria de Terrassa the driving force behind the Romanesque paintings depicting the martyrdom of Thomas Becket? These are some of the questions of a historical puzzle that took place in Catalonia during the second half of the twelfth century.