**Replication or rivalry? The ‘Becketization’ of pilgrimage in English Cathedrals**

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**Abstract**

The royally-initiated murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket in his own Cathedral church in 1170 sent shockwaves through Europe, yet few could have foreseen the spectacular expansion of his cult throughout Christendom in the following decade. While many of the individual structural and performative aspects of the of the cult were hardly new, being already in evidence in England or assimilated from the Continent, the sudden and lasting success of the ‘Becket model’ was to shape the nature of cult within and beyond English cathedrals for the remainder of the Middle Ages. The monks of Canterbury filled their Cathedral with Becket signifiers and carefully managed access to them, in the process confirming themselves as sole custodians of the cult. Pilgrim activity was controlled to take place against a backdrop of the cathedral liturgy, and intended to promote the cathedral community’s influence in ecclesiastical and secular matters. This article provides new readings of the use of sacred space in the cathedrals of Canterbury, Durham, and York, and shows the influence of Becket’s cult both in the medieval and modern constructions of the pilgrimage experience.

**Keywords**

Cathedrals; Canterbury; Durham; York; Thomas Becket; Pilgrimage; Medieval

The medieval cult of saints was based upon a constant process of replication. As Richard Keickhefer (1988, 32-3) states, the *mythos*  of a saint is primarily characterized not by his or her individuality, but through ‘assimilation to types... the saint emerges less as an individual with idiosyncratic emotions, views, and habits than as a representative,’ as an ideal Christian type of the king/queen, monk/nun, martyr, bishop or other holy figure. Saintly lives are often recounted in ahistorical or transhistorical terms, replicable within changing cultural circumstances, serving as an ideal-type of Christian perfection (ultimately referring back to Christ himself) in a particular person.

If the cult of saints, as this would suggest, was essentially backward-looking and hidebound by typology, what accounts for the dynamism which any study of medieval hagiology reveals? Recent work on medieval attitudes to ‘the new’ has addressed longstanding views of the period as fundamentally reactionary, and shown how elements of replication – particularly reconstruction and repetition – can themselves be productive. Kieckhefer (1988, 35) drew on the work of Karl Rahner to note that ‘in each new era the Church will have to set forth new models to show the continuing adaptability of saintliness. What the saints show are new ways of imitating Christ’. Thus in replication of traditional forms new modes could be advanced. While Charles W. Jones (1947, 57-64) could rightly say ‘all is common in the communion of saints,’ the remark of Patricia Ingham, in her recent work *The Medieval New* (2015, 17), that ‘much depends on how things are repeated’ is the more salient point. The cult of St Thomas of Canterbury, the focus of this paper, introduced little that was ‘new’ to the Christian world. Yet in the combinations of familiar forms, the re-presentation of recognizable tropes, and in the continual and successful reconstruction, repetition, and occasional rejection of cultic elements to fit within a shifting cultural framework, Becket presented a model for replication particularly within a late-medieval English ecclesiastical context.

Becket has attracted, and continues to attract, numerous biographers since his death. (Duggan 2004; Guy 2012; Barlow 1986) The outlines of his life are well-known but bear repeating. He was born in around 1120 to mercantile Norman parents in London. After proving himself a capable ecclesiastical administrator in the household of Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury, he was, on Theobald’s recommendation, made Lord Chancellor and thus the chief administrator of the state by King Henry II in 1155. Following Theobald’s death in 1161 Henry decided to install Thomas, now one of his closest friends, as joint chancellor-archbishop. On, or shortly after, his installation as archbishop, however, Becket resigned the chancellorship and devoted himself to the service of the Church. He spent the last eight years of his life, from 1162 to 1170, frustrating the King’s ambitions to bring the liberties of the English Church under greater royal control. After one particularly tempestuous council the King summoned Becket to a trial and the archbishop fled in exile to France. On his return following a compact between the King and Pope, Becket excommunicated the Bishops of York, London, and Salisbury for their presumed usurpation of his archiepiscopal authority. It was on witnessing King Henry’s angry outburst at the reception of this news that four knights dispatched themselves to Canterbury. While they probably set out to arrest the archbishop, on their arrival Becket resisted then proceeded to provoke them. The knights chased him into the north transept of the Cathedral on the night of 29th December 1170, shortly after the end of Vespers, and hacked him down, in what was to become the most infamous and shocking murder of the Middle Ages.

While the martyrdom was the reason and impetus for Becket’s cult, his political and personal struggles with the king which preceded it provided a more easily imitable hagiographical model. Indeed, there is strong evidence that Becket mimetically positioned his own struggle with the king within a tradition of Christian persecution, celebrating a (non-customary) Mass to St Stephen the protomartyr before his trial and was acting wihtin the model of the martyrs as ‘another Stephen’. (Staunton 2006, 134-6) Martyrs had of course been part of the Christian Church since the beginning and as Michael Staunton has shown Becket’s hagiographies, a number of which were composed by his close companions and members of the archiepiscopal household, and the symbolism of his cult drew heavily and explicitly on earlier tropes. Becket’s potentially problematic life was recast in the mould of Biblical and saintly exemplars to portray it as a more conventional path towards martyrdom, ‘the culmination of his struggle.’ (Staunton 2006, 184-215) Yet more than his martyred forerunners, Becket had died not just for his faith but for the freedom of the universal Church. (Duggan 1982, 32-3) His death in the eyes of some of his hagiographers perhaps surpassed even that of Christ, not least as the archbishop was killed by fellow Christians and his own rightful king rather than by faithless Gentiles. (Staunton 2006, 207-11) His martyrdom was thus an example *par excellence* of the ‘new ways of imitating Christ.’

The concept of what this article calls ‘Becketization’ – how what André Vauchez (1997, 167-70) called the ‘Becket model’ of his life and martyrdom was powerful enough for not just the narrative elements but the practice and trappings of his cult to be replicated – is already well-recognized in the influence his cult had on the subsequent development of sainthood and its trappings, particularly in its literary, artistic and architectural settings. (Crook 2011, 213-57) In England this resulted in a general ‘flavour’ of late-medieval sainthood largely created and promoted from within the institutional church and based around the defence of the rights of the church and opposition to royal overreach in ecclesiastical matters. Hence most English saints after Becket were pugnacious but pious and often ascetic bishops such as Hugh of Lincoln (d. 1200), Richard of Chichester (d. 1253), and Thomas of Hereford (d. 1282), whose tribulations while in office were painted, following Becket, as a form of martyrdom for the Church. A number of ‘political martyrs’ generated popular cults, notably Thomas, Earl of Lancaster (d. 1322) who was killed in battle against the unpopular Edward II, and Richard Scrope, Archbishop of York, who was executed for treason after supporting an uprising against Henry IV. Both of these were overtly promoted by opponents of royal policy as successors or companions of St Thomas in martyrdom. (Piroyanski 2008; Walker 1995; Binski 2004, 123-46)

If the hagiographical replication of Becket’s life and martyrdom has received attention in modern historiography, so has the influence of the artistic dynamism of the early cult. Paul Binski’s work is at the forefront of this area, showing how the Cathedral at Canterbury, largely rebuilt after Becket’s death, stood as ‘both a modern and an archetypal building’ reflecting contemporary concerns about ‘the relationship of old and new.’ Drawing on contemporary developments in French architecture, Becket’s ‘shrine-church’ provided an exemplar for English great churches from the late-twelfth century, ‘never to be copied, so much as interpreted’. (Binski 2004, 3-43) The iconography of the cult, centred on but not limited to the powerful image of Becket’s martyrdom, the bishop before the altar of the Virgin on the right, head bowed to receive the death stroke from the knights advancing on the left, has received extensive study in proportion to the ubiquity of his symbolism throughout medieval Europe. Paul Webster’s excellent introductory essay to a recent collection of work on the early cult highlights the breadth and depth of ongoing scholarship concerning Becket’s rapid transformation into an ‘icon’. (Webster 2016a, 13-17; Borenius 1932; Gameson 2002)

This study builds on such work to highlight three aspects of the ‘Becketization’ of English cathedrals previously overlooked or misinterpreted. Centred on the experience of pilgrims to Becket’s shrine in Canterbury, it is argued that from the ‘messy’ and pilgrim-led enthusiasm of the early cult, the monks re-established their Cathedral as a shrine-church but, importantly, *not* as a ‘pilgrim-church’. Instead the monks were innovative in the development of a space primarily designed to incorporate the shrine in their daily liturgy, while also permitting the highly stage-managed access of pilgrims. As Becket’s life was a reinterpreted to suit a model of martyrdom for the puropses of the Church, so the practice of his cult in the Cathedral was reinterpreted to suit the purposes of the monks of Canterbury. Another ‘Becketization’ follows from this misunderstanding of the nature of the Cathedral space, whereby modern historians have sought to discover a ‘pilgrim route’ within the church. These reconstructions will be shown to be primarily monastic processional paths. A correct understanding of the way in which pilgrims negotiated the space is key to interpreting their interactions with the saint. The subsequent interpretation of other English cathedral spaces in the light of a supposed ‘pilgrim route’ at Canterbury has led to a mistaken assumption that pilgrims invariably took a path, often didactic, to the main shrine of all English cathedrals. Finally a re-analysis of cathedral space in the late Middle Ages, particularly at two potential ‘rivals’ in Durham and York, shows how Becket and Canterbury influenced the construction of the pilgrim experience at English cathedrals in more subtle and yet more effective ways than the establishment of fixed routes for the visiting laity.

**The Becketization of Canterbury**

The first two decades of Becket’s cult, in terms of the pilgrimage experience within Canterbury Cathedral, are the best documented and most thoroughly studied. (Royer-Hemet 2010) The cult was immediate, the shocking murder having occurred in the presence of the monks of the Cathedral and a nave packed with Canterbury locals celebrating Christmastide Vespers. Canterbury was no isolated backwater; not only was it the mother church of England but the city was a trade and transport hub for the south-east, on the main London-Dover road. Dissemination of the news wasrapid, not least thanks to a contingent of monks sent at once to inform the Pope. (Urry 1999, 150; Duggan 2012) Due to the pollution of the Cathedral with the archbishop’s blood, once the laity had been cleared from the scene Becket’s body was, perhaps with some haste in fear of further reprisals from King Henry’s men, placed in a floor-tomb in the crypt that he had chosen for himself. The Cathedral was then technically closed for around a year until it could be consecrated, although due to the overwhelming demands of pilgrims and devotees to see the site of the martyrdom and be in the presence of the martyr’s body the cult’s foundational sites were made accessible from Easter 1171. From the outset the monks recorded miraculous events attributed to St Thomas that occurred both at and away from the tomb, with pilgrims coming to give thanks and tell their tale, resulting in the largest body of miracle stories for any English saint. (Robertson and Brigstocke, 1875-85, vol 1, 137-546; vol. 2, 21-281; Koopmans 2011, 139-200)

Part of the reason for this instant popularity was the ‘novelty’ of the cult. Novelty, as Ingham notes, ‘smacks of the cheap, the ephemeral, the trivial’ (and, we could add, the sensational), yet more importantly connects to ideas of playfulness, creativity, and flexibility – ‘novelties are toys, after all’. (Ingham 2015, 7) The immediate response of the congregation within Canterbury Cathedral, on finding their archbishop martyred on the flagstones of his church, was to gather his blood in receptacles or to soak it up with scraps of cloth and carry it away as a relic. The first miracle was probably performed later that night, not under the auspices of the monks but in a citizen’s house where a woman was cured by drinking a tincture of Becket’s blood. The creation of healing waters through the washing of relics was a long-standing feature of Christian practice and the act of drinking blood was a clear imitation of Eucharistic practice, yet to drink the blood of a saint was a shockingly ‘new’ development of these models. It was a replication of the most sacred and divine Christological rite within a domestic and merely hagiological context. These powerful resonances, however, provided the impetus for this to become one of the most prominent elements of the first century of the cult and was embraced and promoted by the monks of Canterbury who soon began to mix the ‘Thomas Water’ themselves. Yet as the compiler of Becket’s first miracle collection noted, ‘it is not usual for humans to drink human blood’, and it was only through the undeniable proof of the miracles that this novel interpretation of existing practices had become established. (Robertson and Sheppard 1875-85, vol. 3, 150; Koopmans 2016; Jordan 2009)

The initial stages of the cult were marked by imitation. The trappings of the cult were familiar. The tomb was covered by a protective marble box with holes in the sides so the devotees could insert their heads and kiss the tomb slab. This ‘*foramina*’tomb was popular throughout Europe and was a replica of the protective case that covered the holy tombs in Jerusalem. (Crook 2011, 190-4) The ‘Thomas Water’, a fusion of water-relics and the Eucharist, was mixed in a font by the tomb custodians and doled out to pilgrims. Furthermore, an early Icelandic account of the life and afterlife of the saintclaimed that ‘the very marble [of the Cathedral flagstones] rendered itself soft to the footsteps of the archbishop...these footprints may still be seen, and now receive many a kiss amid the devotion of kneeling pilgrims’. (Magnusson 1875, 541, 551) The model of Christ’s footprint imprinted on the rock in Jerusalem, was thus replicated in the north transept chapel at Canterbury. (Pringle 1993, vol. 3, 72-6) We should not assume that all pilgrims were personally acquainted with all models, but watching the devotions of others, in line with the culturally-accepted and traditionally-derived pilgrim practice, created its own Becket-focused culture within the Cathedral.

That culture almost instantly produced its own imitators. In 1175 Laurence O’Toole (Lorcán Ua Tuathail), Archbishop of Dublin spent the night by the tomb to seek the saint’s aid in his own troubled negotiations with Henry II. The following morning, while celebrating Mass in the cathedral, a ‘fool’ (*fatuus*) who had heard that the archbishop was a holy man, conceived ‘in his simple foolishness’ the pious notion that ‘such a blessed man should be made equal with St Thomas in martyrdom.’ He took a large staff and, rushing through the crowds, struck the archbishop on the head with all his might causing him to collapse gravely wounded at the side of the altar. The archbishop did not die, however, and requested holy water to be poured on the wound and the sign of the cross to be made, healing it. (Plummer 1918, 144)[[1]](#footnote-1) In this story, not previously noted in accounts of the early cult, the process of the ‘Becketization’ of Insular bishops and the power of Becket as a model for replication is physically played out for the first time in the febrile atmosphere of the Cathedral in the decade after the martyrdom. That the instigator was a lay ‘fool’ indicates the importance of ‘playfulness’ in the process of (in this case failed) replication. Ultimately the story reinforces the power of Becket’s own martyrdom, healing his would-be imitation – preventing the replication – and the healed body providing a witness.

Comparison with other cathedrals suggests a widespread freedom of pilgrim activity at English cultic centres in the twelfth century, of both new and long-established cults. To an extent this may be due to hagiographical tropes, in which the voluminous Becket literature fits as a culturally-specific, or, as Koopmans (2011, 45) puts it ‘faddish’ enthusiasm for recording activity wherein the spectacular, unmediated, and more creative miracles receive greater prominence. Yet it may also signify a new flowering of pilgrimage activity which Becket’s cult reveals in its developed form. Simon Yarrow (2006, 7-8) suggests a qualitative shift in the nature of English pilgrimage and cathedrals was heralded by the translation of the first six abbots of St Augustine’s Abbey, Canterbury, to shrines at the east end in 1091. More than any such event for some time ‘the scale of the ceremony and the crowds of lay people involved’ marked the beginning of a new phase in English pilgrimage. Durham Cathedral was completed in 1104 when the incorrupt body of its seventh-century patron saint, Cuthbert, was translated to a shrine in a small apse behind the high altar. Typical for English great churches of the immediate post-Conquest period, despite Cuthbert’s strong regional popularity nothing in the plan of the Cathedral suggests that large numbers of pilgrims were expected, or even necessarily wanted. Many miracles occurred when ‘none of the monks were in the church’ at times outside of the hours when the monks were using the choir and shrine for their liturgy. (Raine 1835, 91-2) Unsupervized pilgrims stole from the church, accidentally started fires, and crawled all over and under the shrine in search of the most tactile experience. Even at Canterbury in the first years of the Becket cult, monastic control over pilgrims seems to have been limited to patrols of the church and a presence at the tomb. (Koopmans 2011, 161-7; Nilson 1988, 95-7) This light-touch regulation common, apparently, to the major English pilgrimage destinations in the twelfth century, resulted in a culture of pilgrimage, revealed and even celebrated in the miracle collections of the time, of expressive and creative interaction with the saint.

An historiographical problem in the understanding of pilgrim activity within medieval English Cathedrals has been the marked weighting in available evidence towards the twelfth century. These, as we have seen, are situated within a cultural expectation of pilgrimage as extremely tactile, emotional, and creative. The miracle collections of subsequently-arising cults such as Thomas of Hereford (d. 1282) usually cover only the first few years of activity at the tomb-shrine, and are thus only helpful in gauging the febrile atmosphere in the time immediately following the first flush of miracles at a given site. Even at Canterbury, despite the prominence and importance of the cult, the earliest (brief) first-hand account of pilgrimage within the Cathedral comes from the early-fourteenth century, followed by Margery Kempe in the 1410s, two in the 1450s, and three from the sixteenth century. (Esposito 1960, 26-8; Bale 2015, 29-31; Letts 1957, 43-4, 50-1; Sneyd 1847, 30-1; Halkin et al. 1972, 486-94; *State Papers* 1830, part 2, 583-4) To this we can add three documents composed by the monks which discuss pilgrims. (Foreville 1958, 129-44; Bowers 1992, 58-79; British Library Add MS 59616 fos 1-11v) So to counterbalance the evidence of around 700 miracle stories compiled within the Cathedral in the first decade or so of the cult, the remaining three and a half centuries provide little more than nine pieces of documentary evidence directly concerned with how pilgrims interacted with the cult. However, what these few accounts do show, in conjunction with the architectural evidence, is that the character of pilgrimage changed markedly after the translation of Becket’s relics into a new shrine, in a reconstructed Cathedral, in 1220. In ‘Becketizing’ their church it was the monks who had established clear control over any interaction with their saint.

The events of the first half century after Becket’s death allowed the monks of Canterbury to present him as their protector and themselves as his rightful custodian. His successors as archbishop, Richard of Dover (d. 1184) and Baldwin of Forde (d. 1190), were at pains to distance themselves from the martyr’s combative relationship with the king (despite Henry II’s own adoption of Becket as a royal saint), allowing the monks to establish a hold on the cultic setting. (Slocum 2012, 63) The martyred archbishop became a rallying-point in the monks’ disputes with his archiepiscopal successors over the next few decades, over plans to create a rival college of secular priests funded by the pilgrim offerings to Becket’s tomb and possibly intended as a destination for the saint’s relics, which the monks feared would usurp their rights in the diocese. (Crosby 1992, 97-100; Sweetinburgh 2011) This was followed by a dispute with King John in the early thirteenth century, also concerning the right of the Cathedral chapter to freely elect the archbishop. (Webster 2011; 2016b) Furthermore, the upper Cathedral including the monastic choir was mostly destroyed in a fire of 1174, although it left Becket’s cult sites in the martyrdom and crypt largely unaffected. The rebuilt Cathedral was ‘Becketized’, with four sites devoted to his cult. The martyrdom and tomb remained, but there was now a grand retrochoir, the Trinity Chapel, beyond and above the High Altar which was to be the location of Becket’s new golden shrine (Fig. 1), and a small apsidal ‘Corona chapel’ beyond it to house a head reliquary with the piece of his skull that had been hacked off by the knights. All of these were in the east end of the Cathedral, beyond the rood screen at the end of the nave which marked the division of space between the ‘public’ nave and the controlled monastic space centred on the choir. (Binski 2004, 3-27; Murray 2014, 47-71; Draper 1997) The utility of Becket’s body to the monastic cause was undeniable, and the monks maximized the effect, replicating his shrines throughout the most sacred areas of their church.

[Fig. 1 around here]

A ‘Customary of the Shrine’ (British Library Add MS 59616 fos. 1-11v), a compilation of documentary material and orally-transmitted tradition and practice produced by the shrine-keepers in 1428, shows the extent to which the monks subjected Becket’s cultic sites to strict rules.[[2]](#footnote-2) The shrine now had opening hours of 5am in summer and 6am in winter. One of the shrine-keepers would ring a bell at the doors of the church to let the pilgrims assembled outside know they could enter for the first Mass of the day, the Thomas Mass at the shrine. In summer the Cathedral closed at lunch, when one of the clerks of the shrine would search the Trinity Chapel with a weapon to make sure that no thieves or stray dogs had concealed themselves there, and after the hour of Nones reopened until dusk when the same search was to be made. These stricter opening times are confirmed by an early fourteenth century register which notes that the Great Gate of the precinct was opened at dawn and closed at dusk and only the servants of the Cathedral allowed in or out during curfew. During summer (Easter to the Exaltation of the Cross, 14th September) the gate was closed and the church and precinct cleared of laity so the monks could have lunch and a communal sleep. (Canterbury Cathedral Archives DCC/Reg K fo. 232v) The monks no longer patrolled the church, but secular stipendiary clergy attached to each of the major altars throughout the Cathedral swore an oath, also found in an early-sixteenth century account-book of the Martyrdom chapel, to uphold the standards of the Cathedral, turn over all offerings to the monks, and to engage with pilgrims ‘in all gentleness, friendliness, and seriousness’ – performing the role of cathedral stewards. (British Library Add MS 59616 fo. 4r; Canterbury Cathedral Archives DCC Lit MS C/11 fo. 37r) The implications for behavioural control within the Cathedral are clear. Margery Kempe described how on her visit in the early fifteenth century she was ‘deeply despised and reproached, both by monks and priests, and by secular people, because she wept so much’. She later found herself locked outside the Cathedral gates ‘for it was in the evening’. (Bale 2015, 29-30) We can compare this with expectations in the early miracle collections that pilgrims *should* weep and vent their emotions freely, and all through the night, at the twelfth-century tomb.

Thus the documentary evidence supports the notion that the transformation of the Cathedral into a Becket church was accompanied by a tightening of restrictions on accepted behaviour. While the most comprehensive written evidence is early-fifteenth century, the earlier evidence of strict curfew and the much ‘tighter’ architectural space of the Trinity Chapel behind the High Altar indicate that the post-rebuilding Cathedral was no longer a space in which pilgrims could act freely. Robyn Malo (2013, 32) has demonstrated that this was a phenomenon common to English cathedrals in the later Middle Ages. Not only were shrine-keepers and their clerks constantly on hand to ensure that the pilgrim experience stayed within accepted norms, but also to regulate and even prohibit the ability of pilgrims to have intimate or tactile communion with the golden shrine. As she rightly states ‘by the fourteenth century, the physical surroundings at English relic sites were promoting an encounter that was characterized by deferral and distance’. The expected interaction with a major shrine was no longer necessarily to touch, but to see, or, perhaps more accurately, to glimpse. One aspect of the architectural setting of the Becket cult at Canterbury that has not been noted in previous literature is the tall iron grilles with lockable gates that surrounded the shrine on all sides. These were bonded to the pillars of the ambulatory by thick iron bands, and the scars where they corroded the marble can be seen clearly today. (Fig. 2) The shrine could thus accommodate monastic or private ceremonies while still allowing pilgrims to see the object of their devotions. It is probable, based on other pilgrimage cults of the time, that boards detailing the hagiography, miracles, and available indulgences, as well as larger votive offerings such as crutches were affixed to the grilles, so the pilgrim would view the saint through a foreground of evidence for his power. At Durham the ironwork around the shrine platform of St Cuthbert had, amongst other things, relics attached to it, suggesting a viewing of the saint through another imposed layer of sanctity. (Fowler 1902, 5)

[Fig. 2 around here]

Furthermore, the golden casket containing Becket’s remains, on top of the tall marble shrine base, had a wooden cover which could be raised and lowered. The Customary is silent on the exact times at which it would be raised, aside from the fifteen days when it was removed for the vigil and double octave of the Feast of the Translation, but by comparison with other sites it seems likely that the shrine was uncovered during the main monastic hours and for important visitors. (British Library Add MS 59616 fo. 8r; Fowler 1902, 4) By stage-managing the times when the shrine was on display the monks could heighten the sensation of sacrality even if the object was at a distance. As Jane Garnett and Gervase Rosser (2013, 116-20) suggest in their study of post-medieval image cults in north-west Italy, ensuring that the object of desire was not always on show made it more desirable, more mysterious, and more special: ‘custodians have always been wary of the diluting effect of over-exposure’.

Of great symbolic and experiential importance to this form of visitor management was ensuring that the most desirable times for pilgrims to encounter the shrine fell during the performance of the monastic liturgy. By the later Middle Ages, pilgrims were expected to prepare for their first devotions at the shrine both by being shriven and in fasting overnight before entry. (Bowers 1992, 66) As such it was customary for most to visit the shrine before lunch. By opening the church at five and holding the first Mass at the shrine, then remaining open throughout the morning hours when the monks would be in the choir or performing morning Masses at the Cathedral’s many altars, the Cathedral community could impress upon pilgrims the institutional-devotional focus of the church, while also providing a multi-sensory experience. Miracle stories elsewhere show that on feast days the sound of the morning liturgy emanating from the monastic choir, combined with the other sensory elements of Divine Service – the smell and fog of incense, the flickering candles – was the backdrop to some of the more impressive miracles, occurring ‘as the choir began the introit’, or ‘just as Bishop Hugh said “I believe in one God”’. (Raine 1835, 37-41, 98-101, 208-10)The Customary also shows how the monks viewed the role that Becket played within their Cathedral. In a document that runs to almost 9,000 words, ‘pilgrim’ or its cognates only appear eight times. Far more important in the management of the shrine was the time when it was included in the monastic liturgy. Every Monday the monks went in procession to the shrine after Vespers to sing the collects of the day; every Tuesday, held sacred to St Thomas, a solemn Mass was celebrated at the shrine in the presence of all the monks; and at all principal and secondary feasts in the year the monastic processions concluded with a service at the shrine. (British Library Add MS fos. 3r-9r) The regular incorporation of their patron saint into the monastic rite served to reinforce the relationship between Becket’s status as a protector of the liberties of the Church and of his community, and the monks’ role as the rightful custodians of his cult and legacy. Their services were in themselves proof of their rights, and formed the connection between shrine, liturgy, and community that also served as the basis for the late medieval pilgrim experience. This was not in itself new. Monastic communities had long centred their rites on patronal relics. However, in England at least the increased numbers of pilgrims wishing to interact with the saints of monastic churches led to the problem of having to balance competing usage of the shrine. The monks of Canterbury solved this by allowing highly-controlled pilgrim access at times when they would be adjacent to monastic ritual, thus feeding and shaping the popular cult in order to emphasize their own power and influence in their custodianship of the saint. As we shall see, it was a ‘best practice’ model adopted by most English great churches.

This picture is corroborated by an account composed by a monk of the Cathedral of the rites performed in 1420 at the bicentennial Jubilee of Becket’s translation. This makes it clear that the monastic processions and Masses were the foremost consideration, to the extent that the east end was inaccessible to the laity while the monks and their honoured guests processed ‘first to the martyrdom of St Thomas, then to the tomb of the same, to the blessed Virgin in the crypt, to the high altar, to the shrine of St Thomas, to the corona of the same, to the memorials of Saints Alphege, Blaise, and Dunstan, and also to the relics of the church, with slow step, with all prostrating themselves in the devotion of their prayers, offering libations with money to God and the blessed martyr, just as is allowed to them’. This was followed by a liturgical monastic procession proper to the day, which with some difficulty went from the choir, through the nave, cloisters, up to the shrine, to the nave again and back to the choir, ensuring the continued inclusion through ritual movement of the liturgical space of the east end, the public space of the nave, and the monastic-communal space of the cloister in the celebration of St Thomas. (Foreville 1957, 140-2)

The crowds that had turned up to see Becket’s shrine (and collect the indulgence for having done so) were unable to get beyond the screen at the east end of the nave, and thus probably unable to see any of Becket’s cultic sites. They were instead given a sermon from the nave pulpit on the benefits that they had accrued just by their presence. This proved so popular that the preacher had to repeat it three times for the benefit of newcomers who had not been able to hear the words, who beseeched him to ‘enrich us who stood at a distance, and restore certainty in that conceded indulgence to all pilgrims to the shrine of St Thomas’. (Foreville 1957, 142) While the late medieval desire for indulgences perhaps invited a more transactional than tactile relationship with saints and their settings, nonetheless the monastic control over the space was by this point accepted within English pilgrimage culture to the extent that devotees were content not even to see, but only to hear, in order to feel that they had adequately communed with St Thomas.

**‘And sith to other places of holynes’: the late-medieval pilgrim experience**

The post-1220 shrine was, therefore, carefully curated to ensure that Becket was at the heart of the Cathedral and its liturgy, bringing his influence to bear on the desires of the monastic community, and only secondarily to provide for the wishes of pilgrims (and even then only within acceptable bounds). Yet because of its four cultic sites – martyrdom, tomb, corona and shrine – the historiographical consensus has been that Canterbury Cathedral was designed as a ‘pilgrimage-centred building’. (Binski 2004, 19) It had a clearly defined route which, as seen in the monastic procession of 1420, taken by Nilson as ‘typical’ of the pilgrim route around the Cathedral, started at the site of the martyrdom in the north transept, relating his death followed by his burial and the early cult at the tomb in the crypt, before rising from the darkness to the light and brilliance of the Trinity Chapel, symbolising his continued life in the pantheon of the saints. This is certainly elegant and didactic, and it was undeniably a processional route used by the monks. Yet as a pilgrim route it is largely unworkable based on the available evidence. As is evident in the attempts at reconstructing exactly how pilgrims would get around the Cathedral in this fashion, the path either results in impossible bottlenecks forming at the entrances to the crypt, where the path would have to double back on itself, or in an unacceptable transgression of monastic space within or around the choir. (Nilson 1999, 101-3; Tatton-Brown 2002, 102-7; Hearn 1994, 44-6)

It is perhaps unfortunate that the fullest account of a tour around the Cathedral comes from the early sixteenth century when Erasmus, an unusual pilgrim in that he had a letter of introduction from the archbishop, somewhat satirically described his experiences there. He describes visiting the site of the martyrdom, followed by the tomb, along the north choir aisle, to the Corona chapel, then the shrine itself, then back to the crypt to see the high-status chapel of Our Lady Undercroft. (Halkin et al. 1972, 486-94) This description, combined with the 1420 processional route and the undeniable symbolism of that path around the Cathedral have resulted in a consensus that this *must* have been akin to the general pilgrimage experience. Yet of thesurviving accounts of medieval pilgrimage within the Cathedral, only Erasmus takes this route, and it isclear that the Prior was conducting a personal guided tour. Every other account, from that of the Irish Franciscan Symon Semeonis in 1323 (Esposito 1960, 26-8) to William Penison’s visit with the Lady of Montreuill in 1538 (*State Papers* 1830, part 2, 583-4), first describes the experience at the shrine before going on to note some (but rarely all) of the other sites within the Cathedral.

Furthermore, the route Erasmus took from the south door of the rood screen to the martyrdom would only have been available after the 1440s, when a tunnel was inserted under the choir steps. All the other accounts make it clear that the first point of call for pilgrims was the shrine itself, even after the insertion of the crossing tunnel. The companions of the Bohemian nobleman Leo of Rozmital, detailing their experiences of the Cathedral in the 1450s, first mention the main shrine in the Trinity Chapel, then the relics that were shown to them in the north choir aisle, presumably from the great relic cupboard which stood there, and only subsequently the other cultic sites. (Letts 1957, 43-4, 50-1) It is particularly notable that even such higher-status visitors as the nobleman’s companions, or the Venetian ambassador to England in 1500, were not taken on the processional tour but went straight to their main goal: the famous shrine.

The few other first-hand accounts confirm that pilgrims were primarily concerned with the shrine itself, and the other cultic sites were explored afterwards. The *Customary* suggests as much in its description of the opening of the Cathedral in the morning, when pilgrims hurried in to catch the first Mass of the day at the shrine. Perhaps the most compelling evidence comes from the ‘Canterbury Interlude’ which forms the prologue to the poem *The Tale of Beryn* (Bowers 1992, 58-79), a continuation of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* probably composed within Canterbury Cathedral and dated to around 1420. (Brown 1991, 153, 158-60) This rich but underused source for medieval English pilgrimage shows how Chaucer’s pilgrims, once lodged in Canterbury, having fasted overnight came to the Cathedral ‘mid-morning’ and faced a literal rite of passage at the south porch where a monk sprinkled them with holy water, preparing them for communion with the saint. On entry they were treated individually according to their worldly status: ‘everich after other, righte as they were of states’. From the entrance, they passed straight to the shrine up the south choir aisle, gave their offerings, and only afterwards explored the other sites within the Cathedral, again according to their rank, status, and need, until the monastic morning liturgy was complete and it closed for lunch:

[They] Kneled adown tofore the shryne, and hertlich hir bedes

They preyd to Seynt Thomas, in such wise as they couth.

And sith, the hoy relikis, ech man with his mowith

Kissid, as a goodly monke the names told and taught.

And sith to other places of holynes they raughte

And were in hir devocioun tyl service were al doon,

And sith they drowgh to dynerward, as it drew to noon. (Bowers 1992, 67)

[They kneeled down before the shrine, and devoutly on their rosaries

Prayed to St Thomas, in such manner as they knew how

and then the holy relics each man with his mouth

kissed, as a good monk told and taught their names.

And then they went to the other holy places

and were in their devotions till the [monastic] services were done

and then they went to lunch, around noon.]

The key to understanding Canterbury as a late-medieval pilgrimage destination (and as shall be argued, understanding pilgrimage to English cathedrals) is that the shrine was the primary object of pilgrim attention, and the ‘route’ was from the south porch, along the south aisle of the nave, and up the south choir aisle to the shrine. It is worth noting that the oft-quoted monastic chronicle of 1392 describing the north choir aisle as ‘the way which goes to the shrine’ must be describing a monastic, rather than a pilgrimage route, forming as it does the passage to the shrine from the monks’ dormitory. The first-hand accounts again make it clear that this was a space into which pilgrims might be invited to view relics, not that they ‘usually moved down the north aisle’. (Woodruff 1911, 62; Nilson 1999, 102) After paying one’s devotions the other cultic sites, and the rest of the Cathedral, were explored not on the basis of a ‘route’, but through negotiation with the Cathedral clergy based on status and need. In this context the vastness of the Cathedral’s relic collections, outlined in a 1315-16 inventory, could cater to all ranks and tastes. (Legg and Hope 1902, 79-94)

In terms of the influence of Becket on Canterbury and English cathedrals generally, it has also been important to establish three connected points: firstly, the accepted ‘pilgrimage route’ around medieval Canterbury was a monastic processional route; secondly, that the shrine was the first port of call for most pilgrims, rather than the culmination of their visit; and thirdly the south choir aisle was the main way to the shrine. Understanding the south choir aisle as the main route to the shrine, and inverting the accepted ‘route’ so that the shrine was the main and primary object, with subsidiary sites visited as part of an individually-tailored negotiation of the cathedral space, aids an understanding of the post-Translation Cathedral space as co-opted into the dominant Becket narrative. This is particularly notable in the siting of the archiepiscopal tombs of Robert Winchelsey (d. 1313), Simon Meopham (d. 1333), and Simon Sudbury (d. 1381) along the south choir aisle.

The Translation had changed the focus of the cult within the Cathedral from a ‘public’ to an institutional one, replicating Becket’s presence throughout the building. The monks were able to use this setting to respond to developments in English culture and politics by placing Becket (and therefore themselves) within wider spheres of influence. In the fourteenth century the episcopality of the cult was stressed, beginning in 1314 with the creation of a new gold and bejewelled head reliquary dressed in mitre and vestments. (British Library MS Galba E iv fo. 101v) The vast number of pilgrim badges depicting it from this period attest its importance to the renovated setting, and *vice versa* it may have been this new shrine that gave the impetus to the new forms of pictorial pin badges that were being created in Canterbury at this time and rapidly overtaking the old Thomas Water *ampullae* in popularity. (Spencer 1998, 78-117) The Thomas Water itself, always open to charges of dubious Eucharistic similarities, ceased to be promoted as blood by the Cathedral and became instead a miraculous signifier. In the early fourteenth century in-house chronicle the *Polistorie* (British Library MS Harley 636 fo. 143v), the water was said to be drawn from a well which, on Thomas’ death, had changed into milk, then four times to ‘the colour of blood’, then back to water. This symbolism had been present in the cult almost from the start, reflected in the colours of the marble around the shrine and explicit in the liturgy for the feast of the Martyrdom, but it had previously been secondary in the cult to the thaumaturgic powers of Becket’s blood. (Binski 2004, 3-9)

Rather than a focus on the uniqueness of Becket’s death and blood-relic, the emphasis on episcopality and the symbols rather than the actuality of martyrdom seems likely to have been connected to the struggles with the Crown of the recently deceased Archbishop Winchelsey, described with some exaggeration as the ‘new Thomas’. (Denton 1980, 244-5) He had a tomb sited in the south-east transept which quickly became a popular cult site and appears to have remained so until the Reformation, being the only monument apart from Becket’s to be destroyed by Henry VIII’s commissioners. (Denton 1980, 15-33) His surviving miracles show a concentration on the kind of disruptive healing that had characterized the early years of Becket’s cult, particularly of the insane who needed to spend long periods in communion with the saint, in some cases returning each day for several weeks, before a cure. (Cambridge University Library MS Ee v 31 fos. 202r-205v) The liturgically-important shrine was, as Margery Kempe discovered, no longer suitable for such activity, but the tomb of St Thomas’ successor archbishop, set up in the liturgically unimportant space of the transept and on the way to the shrine (indeed, within sight of it) could be provided as that of an appropriate suffragan appropriating the glories of the martyr. Further east along the south choir aisle two further fourteenth century archiepiscopal tombs, of Sudbury and Meopham, emphasized the episcopal lineage from, and replication of, St Thomas. Meopham’s connection with martyrdom is obscure, but Sudbury was beheaded by an angry mob during the Peasants’ Revolt, and a few miracles and receipts of pilgrim offerings survive. More importantly for the establishment of their connection to Becket is the position and nature of their tombs, both immediately before the iron gate that marked the entrance to the shrine area and provided with functional prayer-niches. (Crook 2011, 277-9; Tatton-Brown 2002, 105-6) The implication is that if the shrine was closed for private Masses, or too busy to admit pilgrims for entrance, his successors were both appropriate recourse for the prayers of pilgrims to St Thomas. They were not rivals to the main shrine but gained their power and resonance from their replication of aspects of the cult and its setting, and were in turn affirmed in their status as the inheritors and reinterpreters of Becket’s typology by the attentions of pilgrims.

The historiographical failure to date is in seeing the Cathedral as a ‘pilgrimage church’ rather than what it was, a site within which the monks of Canterbury could, through ritual reaffirmation of their links with England’s premier saint, emphasise their own role within the archdiocese and, concomitantly, the protection of the liberties of the Church. Pilgrims were of use in that they validated and reaffirmed the status of St Thomas – without pilgrims the cult had little effective claim to authority – but the experience they were provided with was carefully managed to elide the saint with the monastic setting, through a liturgical backdrop, and show the ongoing replication of his exemplar through the tombs of his successors on the way to the shrine. It was this model that we see replicated in late medieval English cathedrals, and to which we now turn.

**Becketizing England’s Cathedrals**

As John Crook has argued (2011, 213-57), the translation of Becket’s remains and subsequent developments in the architecture of his cult were ‘highly significant’ for the presentation of cults in late medieval English churches. Historians studying medieval English cathedrals cannot but be aware of Canterbury, and particularly its supposed ‘pilgrim route’. Ben Nilson’s reconstruction of the medieval pilgrimage experience takes as a given that pilgrims would take a route from the nave to the shrine behind the high altar in all medieval great churches, even if this involved, as he suggests at late medieval York and possibly at Canterbury, pilgrims entering the liturgical choir and going through the processional doors beside the high altar. (Nilson 1999, 101-3) For the highest-status visitors such transgression of the church’s holiest space may have been an option on an invitational or negotiated basis, but it is difficult to see how this would have operated in practice, or been acceptable to the clerical or monastic communities.

Following our reinterpretation of the space at Canterbury, however, instead of plotting links between the sacred spaces of the Cathedral which would form a ‘pilgrimage route,’ we can look instead at the functionality of the individual areas. This is particularly clear in the retention, as at Canterbury, of the empty tomb as a cultic site following the translation of saintly remains to a raised shrine in the east end of the church. The provision of multiple cultic sites in this manner, often combined with the enshrinement of part of the head or a limb for portable, processional use was a feature of twelfth-century English hagiology, and one of which Canterbury was an imitator rather than instigator. (Crook 2000, 30-1, 163-9; Nilson 1998, 54-7) John Blair (1988, 249) noted of the shrine and empty tomb in St Frideswide’s Priory, Oxford, based on a study of the 1180 miracle collections, that ‘the normal locus for invalids spending long-term vigils in the church was the grave, whereas the main liturgical focus of the cult was the feretory’. Similar divisions of function can be identified in the post-translation miracles at York Minster where the tomb in the centre of the nave was ‘used’ by the laity and pilgrims and the shrine in the retrochoir reserved for the clergy and high-status devotees, and at Winchester where the empty tomb of St Swithun in its western chapel was more freely accessible than the shrine and thus apparently the site of popular devotions. (Raine 1879-94, vol. 2, 538-9) Although the tomb sites are often described in the historiography as ‘empty’, we should be wary of assuming this. In the case of incorrupt saints such as Cuthbert, clearly the translation involved the whole body. Yet at York the ‘empty’ tomb site was excavated in 1973 and found to contain the skeletal remains of most of St William’s torso. The translation of 1284 had apparently only involved the re-enshrinement of the ‘long bones’. (Phillips and Atkinson 1985, 125-7) These ‘empty’ tombs may, therefore, have retained a portion of the saint’s relics, obviating the need for an argument about holy presence in absence.

At Durham the site of St Cuthbert’s former resting place was retained as a cenotaph following translation to the shrine behind the high altar in 1102, and the one surviving miracle account which occurred there shows its use as a place of recourse when the main shrine was too busy or inaccessible. (Raine 1835, 98-101) St. Cuthbert was ‘incorrupt’ and thus his body was translated in its entirety, perhaps accounting for the primacy of his shrine as both a lay-devotional and liturgical focus rather than a separation of function within the Cathedral. Yet Durham is one of the clearest examples of ‘Becketization’ in terms of the management of Cathedral space. Following the Trinity Chapel of Canterbury in spirit if not precise form, in the mid-thirteenth century an ambulatory setting for the shrine was provided in the form of the Chapel of Nine Altars, a long retrochoir on a north-south axis adjoining the shrine to the east. The shrine itself was on a raised stone platform surrounded by iron grilles and relic cupboards, only accessible through doors at the east ends of the choir aisles and through the reredos screen. (Crook 1994; Draper 1980; Fowler 1902, 1-7) Formerly the shrine setting presented problems for pilgrim access which could only come through the monastic choir. The installation of the ambulatory led, as at Canterbury, to the potential of a two-tier access scheme, negotiable with the monks, either through invitation into the inner sanctum to pray at the shrine itself or through a visual experience from the ambulatory, where prayer niches were also provided in the stone walling of the shrine platform. (Fig. 3)

[Fig. 3 around here]

It has generally been understood that pilgrims accessing the shrine of St Cuthbert would, assuming its nature as a ‘pilgrim church,’ have entered through the north porch of the nave and then progressed through a series of thick stone screens and gates down one of the choir aisles, themselves cramped with altars, offices, and the ironwork surrounding episcopal tombs. This has posed a number of problems, not least, as with Canterbury, in the necessary violation of monastic space by every visiting pilgrim, space which was otherwise jealously preserved by the monks of Durham. If, however, following our understanding of pilgrim access to Becket we re-analyse the space of Durham as primarily a monastic-institutional shrine church in which the later medieval pilgrim experience was tightly controlled, we can more accurately reconstruct the cultic setting of St Cuthbert. ‘Becketization’ at Durham, and a number of other monastic cathedrals and great churches, took the form of a reaffirmation of the monastic nature of the space in the face of competing demands on the part of pilgrims. (Crook 2011, 213-57) By physically re-ordering the cult site, the needs and desires of the monks could be presented as rather the needs and desires of the saint. Again, this is not in itself a new development – Cuthbert’s *vita* was rewritten in the late-eleventh century to include a violently misogynistic streak in order that a newly-instituted community of Benedictine monks could ban women from their church. (Tudor 1984) It was the privileging of adjacency of monastic and pilgrim activity over exclusion that characterised the later-medieval model as exemplified in Becket’s cult at Canterbury and replicated at the other English great churches.

The ‘flavour’ of Cuthbert’s cult was somewhat different to that of Becket’s. He had been a monk, a bishop and a hermit-ascetic in the seventh century, but as the patron saint of the community that finally settled at Durham to found their Cathedral he was revered as the protector of the people of north-east England and lowland Scotland. His cult was thus strongly regional, and, as Sally Crumplin (2005, 180-2) has argued, any suggestion that Becket’s cult was a rival to Cuthbert’s fails to take note of the separate spheres of influence and function of the two. Even where the Cuthbert cult responded directly to Becket in the aftermath of his martyrdom, when his miracle collections appear to turn their focus on healing within the Cathedral (Becket’s speciality), as Koopmans (2011, 134-5) notes this reflects more a shift in what was in vogue, hagiographically, than necessarily a desire to be seen to compete with the new cult for fear of losing revenue or influence. The pre-eminence of Becket within the culture of English late medieval sanctity was such that, often, an altar dedicated to him is found in close proximity to the tomb or shrine of a church’s patron saint, reinforcing the communion rather than rivalry between them. Durham is no exception, with one of the Nine Altars, opposite the south-east corner of the shrine platform, dedicated to St Thomas of Canterbury and St Katherine. (Fowler 1902, 1)

As at Canterbury, two important fourteenth-century episcopal tombs, of Anthony Bek (d. 1311) and Richard de Bury (d.1345), indicate by their proximity to the saint both a desire to replicate his model through his successors and the route that pilgrims were expected to take in order to reinforce that connection through their prayers, presence, and offerings. Bek had, according to the late-sixteenth century *Rites of Durham*, a ‘fair marble tomb, underneath a fair marble stone’ situated at the north end of the Nine Altars, ‘being the first Bishop that ever attempted to lie so near the sacred shrine of St Cuthbert’. Richard de Bury lay in the corresponding position on the south side of the Chapel, also in a raised and carved marble tomb. (Fowler 1902, 2) The position of these two tombs suggests, along with the fifteenth-century description of the precious marble which ornamented the doors, blocked after the Reformation, ‘next to the tomb of Bishop Anthony,’ that they were taking advantage of a pilgrimage path that entered through the north door and left through the south door of the Nine Altars, passing across the face of the shrine platform. As at Canterbury, this would allow for the monastic areas of the church around the choir to remain inviolate, and to provide for a pilgrim experience based on the view, or glimpse, of the shrine through iron grilles, with the possibility of further or closer interaction through negotiation with the monks or clergy. It would similarly allow the shrine to be viewed while it was in use for the monastic liturgy, and the *Rites* state that the cover of the shrine was raised on St Cuthbert’s feast day ‘and certain other festival days at the time of divine service’ making the link between the opening times and the monastic rite. (Fowler 1902, 4) The presence of two offering boxes, a large iron one in the Nine Altars ambulatory, and a smaller and more precious one of ivory inlaid with silver and gilt at the shrine, indicates the difference between the ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ access characteristic of late medieval English Cathedrals. (Durham Cathedral Muniments, Feretrar 1397 Status)

The single surviving miracle story from late medieval Durham (Durham Cathedral Muniments, Misc Chart 7159\*) shows the extent to which the monks had remodelled the pilgrim experience from the twelfth century culture noted above to fit in with the practice seen at Canterbury. In 1446 on the feast of Candlemas (2nd February) a ‘gentleman of Devon’ suffering from ‘great madness and bodily disease’ came to the Cathedral at around eight in the morning. He was ‘led up’ to the feretory, indicating the invitational nature of that space. He offered a penny in his right hand that he had vowed to the saint, but ‘because he was a fool without discretion or reason’ he failed to do so with the right prayers, and thus his petition failed. He was taken back up to the shrine at two in the afternoon (when the shrine had reopened after lunch) where he made so much noise through his moans and groans that the shrine custodians threw holy water on him. He then fell asleep for a further two hours, during which a vision of St Cuthbert came to him and healed him by touching his body. We see that the ‘gentleman’ – both a reasonably high-status visitor and a long-distance pilgrim in need – is invited into the shrine area, and at times probably coinciding with, or adjacent to, the performance of monastic hours in the choir to the immediate west. Noise, so much a part of the twelfth century cult, is controlled, and the experience, in this case being allowed to sleep at the shrine till around 4pm, is personalized.

A final comparison of the influence of Becket’s cultic model at Canterbury on the pilgrimage experience elsewhere comes from the Cathedral which is closest to being a genuine ‘rival’. One of Becket’s rivals in his episcopal career was Roger, Archbishop of York, who took the opportunity of the clash between Canterbury and the Crown to push an old claim of the equality of status between the two archdioceses. (Duggan 2004, 36) Although Roger continued to push his primacy claims following Becket’s death, the presence of a vibrant pan-European cult around his erstwhile colleague settled the matter of the ‘mother church’ in practice, if not yet in principle. It is in this light that the cult of St William of York is usually considered. William FitzHerbert (d. 1154) had been Roger’s predecessor as archbishop. An apparently pious and popular man of noble birth, his episcopacy was marked by rival claimants and disputes with the Cistercians of his diocese who claimed to have rights in episcopal elections, and he spent much time in exile. Following his death, from a fever contracted after celebrating Mass, one of his archdeacons was accused of poisoning his communion chalice, but the trial was apparently inconclusive. Although he seems to have been buried in the centre of the Minster’s nave, there is no suggestion of a popular cult in the immediate aftermath of his death. (Norton 2006)

It was only in 1177, on the feast of Pentecost which coincided with the anniversary of William’s death, that miracles began to be recorded at the tomb, beginning with a ten year old girl from Leeds who was healed of blindness. In the following week around thirty more miracles were taken down, mostly concerning healing, and all performed on pilgrims from the archdiocese of York. (Raine 1879-94, vol. 2, 531-7) At first glance the cult seems an obvious response to Becket’s, given the timing, promoted by the canons in an attempt to retain influence through their own sainted archbishop. Yet it may be more accurate to see this as an early use of the ‘Becket model’ to bolster the status of a saint and the Cathedral community within their locality. The conflicts with the local Cistercians had rumbled on, and the monks of Fountains were promoting as a possible saint the man that had been their candidate as William’s rival in life, Henry Murdac (d. 1153), who was also buried in the Minster. (Raine 1879-94, vol. 2, 395; Sykes 2011, 52-4) The Minster apparently had no resident saint in the twelfth century, and certainly not one of any note, so the subject of a popular cult would be a potential battleground in the struggle for influence within the archdiocese. It is this that makes St William’s initial resonances to the ‘Becket model’ – a suggestion of martyrdom at Mass, and the vicissitudes of prolonged exile in the cause of the electoral ‘liberties’ of the diocese and Cathedral chapter – particularly attractive, and his multitude of healing miracles served to confirm his saintly credentials in the contemporary style. The timing of his miracles is significant, as, in a development of the twelfth-century English church, in Pentecost week the parishes of the diocese were to process to the mother church in order to pay their dues both financial and devotional, hence the strongly regional character of his miracles, all of which occurred at the tomb. (Brett 1975, 162-6) As at Durham, the post-Becket response of York’s Cathedral Chapter was to assimilate the popular elements of Becket’s cult to their own ends, in this case to promote ‘their’ bishop (and their electoral rights) over a rival monastic claim, and to reinforce the centrality of the Minster to the devotional life of the archdiocese.

Notably, by the time of the canonization of St William in 1227, seven years after Becket’s translation, the legend had undergone a transformation. Any emphasis on assassination or martyrdom was subsumed in his official *Vita* in favour of the pastoral-episcopal, and highly popular, exemplar of St Nicholas. The *Vita* makes much, therefore, of his popularity among the people of York, his good relationship with the Minster Chapter, and his zeal as a bishop to his flock, foregrounding his local diocesan functions. (Raine, 1879-94, vol. 2, 275-7) In an exaggerated echo of the rebuilding of Canterbury following the fire of 1174, the Minster was said to have been ‘utterly reduced to cinders’ in a fire which broke open St William’s tomb but left his body glowing white, sweet-smelling, but unharmed. The Minster was, according to the narrative, rebuilt ‘with God and [St William] directing and aiding’. (Raine, 1879-94, vol. 2, 279-80) Christopher Norton notes not only that destruction and rebuilding was a longstanding hagiographical trope, but that in this instance the fire may have actually occurred (albeit not quite so totally destructively), but the reference to Canterbury is surely unavoidable. (Norton 2006, 149-50, 162-3; Norton and Harrison 2015) It is notable that the *Vita* also came at the start of a massive rebuilding campaign under Archbishop Walter de Grey, which reoriented the Minster and provided a grand setting for the cult. (Brown 2003, 10-45) The casting of St William as a new founder of the Minster cemented his position as the patron saint of both church and, by extension, archdiocese. The pivot from martyr to pastor allowed for a pairing of episcopal typology with Becket, and far from rejecting the ‘rival’ St Thomas is prevalent throughout the Minster and the diocese. His altar was against the pier at the east end of the north nave arcade, as at Durham in close proximity to the shrine of the cathedral saint and reflecting a communion between the two. (Brown 2003, 122)

**Conclusion**

Saints imitate and replicate each other and, ultimately, Christ. Yet this process is innovative. Becket’s early cult, while clearly situated within the pilgrimage culture of twelfth-century England, was also distinct in its size, its scope, and the power of its martyrological symbolism. It was this new variant on traditional forms that became the ‘Becket model’ for subsequent English sainthood and its artistic settings. After Becket’s translation pilgrims coming to offer their devotions, comprising a sizeable proportion of England’s population over the following three centuries, would have found a Cathedral markedly centred around his cult. Aspects of his cult were repeated throughout the Cathedral, at sites that were visibly controlled by the monastic community, in order to emphasise their custodianship of their resident saint. Becket was then further ‘replicated’ in the form of the posthumous institutialisation of his successor archbishops within the architecture of the cult, ‘Becketizing’ both the office and the monks’ position as electors, and emphasising the continued vitality of the Becket model within a Canterbury setting. This was made explicable to pilgrims, who were thus a witness to mimetic significance, and stage-managed to establish the resident community’s control while allowing pilgrims enough access to satisfy their own devotional desires. Pilgrim expectations were increasingly modulated by the new ideas of visitor management, with visual and even audial contact with the saint being accepted as substitutes for tactility. In place of the ‘messy’ twelfth century practice was a pilgrim experience steeped in liturgy and dependent on the power of the glimpse to heighten the other sensory elements of the shrine setting.

As the mother church of England and the site of the pilgrimage cult of England’s most prominent saint it is perhaps unsurprising that many of the elements that came to characterize the late medieval English pilgrimage experience were popularized, even if usually not invented, at Canterbury. In this regard, it has sadly not been possible, because of the sheer volume of material, to analyse Continental and particularly French developments in great church pilgrim management, although there were certainly parallels which may have had influence, particularly up to the thirteenth century. (Bugslag 2016; Crook 2000) Yet in much the same way as the modern Camino agglomerates a number of traditional aspects of what a pilgrimage route ‘should be’ and is in turn replicated as a reified institution of pilgrimage itself, English cathedrals naturally looked to Canterbury and drew on it as a model while adapting it to their own needs and circumstances. This was not in the manner usually suggested by historians, of routes and the primacy of the shrine, but in the general atmosphere of the cathedral as institutional shrine-church, into which pilgrims were allowed on specific terms, at specific times, and in the knowledge that access to the various sacred spaces was on the basis of invitation and negotiation with the clerical authorities. At Durham, as at Canterbury, the main shrine had both a liturgical and devotional role necessitating the construction of an ambulatory for pilgrims to have visual access while the shrine was closed or in use by the monastic community. At other sites such as York the liturgical and devotional shrines were separate, obviating the need for a ‘pilgrim route’. By the fifteenth century Becket’s shrine had maintained its position as one of England’s premier pilgrimage destinations for three centuries. In that time the monks of Canterbury had shaped the cultic setting of their Cathedral to emphasize the mutual protection of saint and community, a model which was to be widely adopted by the great churches of the nation. From the pilgrim-led experiences of the twelfth century, the ‘flavour’ of English pilgrimage in late-medieval cathedrals and monasteries with long-standing cults was one of ecclesiastical control and carefully-regulated activity, in which the monks of Canterbury had led the way.

Based on research undertaken as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council project ‘Pilgrimage and England’s Cathedrals’ at the University of York, 2014-18

**Captions for figures**

**Fig. 1: A digital reconstruction of the Trinity Chapel and shrine of St Thomas of Canterbury c.1408 (© The Centre for Christianity and Culture, University of York)**

**Fig. 2: Pillar of the Trinity Chapel ambulatory showing corrosion of the marble from the iron bands of a surrounding grille (photo credit: Tiina Sepp)**

**Fig. 3: A digital reconstruction of the Chapel of Nine Altars and feretory platform of St Cuthbert’s shrine, 15th C (© The Centre for Christianity and Culture, University of York)**

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1. Thanks to Darren Cullen for this reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An edition and translation of the customary is currently in preparation by the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)