THE DESTRUCTION OF THE IMAGERY OF
SAINT THOMAS BECKET

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Jean Moore Cucuzzella
Denton, Texas
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This thesis analyzes the destruction of imagery dedicated to Saint Thomas Becket in order to investigate the nature of sixteenth-century iconoclasm in Reformation England. In doing so, it also considers the veneration of images during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Research involved examining medieval and sixteenth-century historical studies concerning Becket’s life and cult, anti-Becket sentiment prior to the sixteenth century, and the political circumstances in England that led to the destruction of shrines and imagery. This study provides insight into the ways in which religious images could carry multifaceted, ideological significance that represented diversified ideas for varying social strata—royal, ecclesiastical and lay.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There appears nothing in his [Thomas Becket of Canterbury’s] life by which he should be called a saint, but rather ... a rebel and traitor to his prince .... Therefore his grace commandeth that they [his images] and pictures throughout the realm should be put down and avoided out of all churches, chapels and other places ... and his name shall be rased [sic] and put out of all the books ... his grace’s loyal subjects shall no longer [be] blindly led and abused to commit idolatry ...

Passages in the Proclamation of Henry VIII, issued from Westminster, November 16, 1538.

In the first half of the sixteenth century, imagery of Saint Thomas Becket (1118-1170) was violently destroyed throughout England. Images existing in stained glass, sculpture, metalworks, and manuscripts that had existed for nearly three centuries were ruthlessly torn down or permanently defaced by order of Henry VIII (1491-1547), King of England. Although Becket was only one example of the many saints whose images were destroyed and names degraded during the iconoclasm of the English Reformation, the destruction of his imagery played an important role in England at this time.

Although sixteenth-century England experienced the destruction of vast amounts of imagery, Becket imagery proved to be more aggravating to Henry VIII than that of any other saint. Created as objects of veneration in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Becket images by the sixteenth century had come to represent despised ideas and institutions to King Henry VIII, who was making a conscious break with traditions of the past. The destruction of Becket imagery ordered by Henry in 1538 manifested an
iconoclastic spirit that was not merely religious, but that responded to a political conflict which had begun three and a half centuries earlier between Henry II of England (1133-89) and Thomas Becket.

In order to understand attitudes towards and perceptions of iconoclasm—the destruction of religious imagery—it is necessary to have a knowledge of the society in which it occurred. The veneration of saints during the Middle Ages in England and the subsequent destruction of related imagery during the English Reformation presents the groundwork for such a study. This thesis will explore the social and political importance of artwork created in veneration of St. Thomas Becket in order to understand a strain of English Reformation iconoclasm. In addition to understanding Thomas’s role in the Reformation, such factors must be considered as Becket’s life and conflict with Henry II, his hagiography, and the veneration of his imagery.

A brief biography of Becket will help put the study in historical context. Thomas Becket was born in London around the year 1118. Destined by his parents for the Church, at the age of twenty-five, he applied for, and was accepted to a position at the household of the Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury (1138-61). In 1154, the young King Henry II appointed Thomas as Chancellor, an act which the Church supported, hoping to find in Becket a protector and defender of the Church. However, Becket served as a useful tool for Henry in limiting the encroachment of the Church’s power over the court. When Archbishop Theobald died in 1161, the king, who was vastly fond of and confident in Becket, made him the new Archbishop of Canterbury. In turn, the king hoped the act would be beneficial to his jurisdiction over England. He wished his court
to exist in harmony with the Church, but to be its superior over secular matters. By appointing Becket as the archbishop, Henry made a strategic move to limit papal power in England. To his annoyance, Becket resigned his chancellorship, taking on the full and serious role of archbishop, thus divorcing himself from Henry II's hold.

No volatile break between Henry II and Becket occurred until discontent over the boundaries of church law and secular law in October of 1163 found the two at extreme odds. Initially, their dispute concerned the punishment of criminous clerks—essentially a disagreement over whether or not the clergy should be subject to secular law or be a separate estate under the complete jurisdiction of the Church. The king wanted to try criminous clerks, but Becket, taking the Church's position, demanded total control over the clergy. The problem put an end to the working relationship of two former friends who became increasingly proud and unmoving.

Henry's formulation of the Constitutions of Clarendon in January 1164 was his attempt to restrict the power of the Church in England and establish the authority of the royal courts over those of the Church. The Constitutions, formerly existing as unwritten "rules," were specifically written clauses, marking boundary lines, functions, and limits of the Church's interaction with the state. The need to map out jurisdictional regulations between church and state had not arisen previously, for they had existed in cooperation with one another. The Constitutions were signed and sealed by Becket reluctantly, but he later rejected them. Becket, who seemed to be intentionally steering the Church into conflict with the state, remained as stubborn as his king, claiming that the rules laid down by the Constitutions were contrary to canon law. However, at this time, canon law was
vague and would not be fully clarified and tightened for another generation.³

Because of Becket's insolent and contrary behavior during the dispute over the Constitutions and canon law, Henry grew eager to be rid of Becket. Henry charged him with trumped up offenses of embezzlement, forcing Thomas to choose exile as opposed to his arrest. Thomas fled to the Cistercian abbey of Pontigny, France for an exile of six years that only prolonged the conflict between church and state.

In November 1170 reconciliation was at hand and Becket returned to England. Incensed that the king had allowed his son Henry to be crowned by the Archbishop of York in his absence, a duty relegated to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Becket obtained from the pope the suspension of the Archbishop of York and the excommunication of the Bishops of London and Salisbury, all of whom had assisted in the coronation.⁴ This act infuriated the king not so much for what the archbishop had done as for the self-centered manner in which he did it. In reaction to Henry's complaints about Becket, his faithful knights, who were eager to please the king, murdered Becket on December 29, 1170 at his own altar in Canterbury. The slaying of Becket horrified the English people, creating an immediate sensation and elevating him to the status of martyr. He was canonized only three years after his death and was soon after transfigured into one of the most popular saints in Western Christendom.⁵

Perhaps Becket is best known for the fame he brought to Canterbury Cathedral posthumously. As a result of his martyrdom, it became one of the major pilgrimage destinations in Europe. His death was immediately followed by miracles connected with his name, numbering up to seven hundred in the first fifteen years.⁶
sensation these stories created gave speedy rise to his cult and to his imagery.

During the Middle Ages, the images of Becket and other holy figures which were venerated gave a material manifestation to holy spirits for the worshipper. Reasonable image worship, or the limited reverence of images in which the separate divine personality was addressed through an image, was regarded by the Catholic Church as acceptable. Indeed, pictures and ornaments could assist an illiterate laity in the lessons of the Scriptures. Throughout periods which were free from iconoclasm in the Middle Ages, images were acceptable because they were said to share in the divine nature of their prototype. However, the uneducated and confused laity fell suspect to worshipping objects to the point of personification wherein a material object became “embodied” with the spirit.

The veneration of images of saints during the Middle Ages reached incredible heights of superstitious mayhem. Fearful of idolatry—worshipping a man-made object which personifies a deity and coveting it as having powers of its own—the reformers of the sixteenth century called for a rejection of the principal practices of religious imagery veneration on the grounds that it was spiritually corrupt. They held that prayer was being replaced by idols and sensationalism resulting in a confusion of what was worldly with what was spiritual.

Iconoclasts based their arguments against images on the Second Commandment:

Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven thing, nor any similitude of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them. (Exod. 20:4-5)
In the purely religious sense, iconoclasm expresses the fear that inserting a notion of the holy and divine into images distracts from the real goal of worship and is a violation of sacred writings. However, the motivation for iconoclasm during the English Reformation was far from an utterly religious phenomenon.

Henry VIII’s break with the papacy was initiated by a combination of personal, political, and theological reasons. In fact, Henry VIII’s problems were a phase in the evolution of the battle between church and state which had many similarities to the conflict over canon law in Becket’s day.

Henry VIII was trying to assert his independence from Rome so that he could be free from his first marriage. Henry’s wife Catherine of Aragon (1485-1536), had not produced a male heir. The widow of Henry’s brother, Catherine was married to Henry through a papal dispensation which he later fought as being contrary to canon law, therefore conveniently requiring an annulment. However, Pope Clement VII (1478-1534) was in exile by order of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1500-58), who was Catherine’s nephew and adamantly opposed the divorce. Thus, the pope could not validate the divorce for fear of provoking the Emperor. When Henry’s Chancellor, Thomas Wolsey (1475-1530), could not secure a divorce, Henry dismissed him. Henry turned to Vicar-General Thomas Cromwell (1485-1540), who at this stage foresaw the opportunity to instill his own radical reformist politics and would eventually play an immensely important role in the impending iconoclastic movement. Together the two proceeded to break Henry’s ties with the papacy by uniting with parliament and passing a law which broke off all pleas to the outside world, especially those of Catherine to the
pope. In doing so, Henry secured control over the clergy and forced them to acknowledge him as the head of the English Church. In 1533, Henry secretly married Ann Boleyn (1507-36) while Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), the new and obedient Archbishop of Canterbury, declared Henry's marriage to Catherine null and void.

Between 1535 and 1540, with the help of Cromwell, Henry took charge of over eight hundred monasteries, churches, and friaries to raise the revenue needed to consolidate the break from Rome. During this period Cromwell exposed the monasteries as corrupt institutions of questionable moral and intellectual standards. He brought to Henry tales of homosexuality and illegitimate children, providing the excuse that Henry needed, and by 1538 all the monasteries were dissolved. Being a man of religious conviction, Cromwell's urge to seize control of England's ecclesiastics was mostly ethical, but for Henry, the Dissolution of the Monasteries was a venture of economics. Dismantling the holdings of the Church's land and taking control of the luxurious embellishments therein made Henry a much richer man. He could now buy the loyalty of the Englishmen who were in danger of returning to the papal fold.

During the disintegration of the monasteries, Cromwell's commissioners were ordered to remove anything which they deemed superstitious so that the clergy should no longer deceive the people with false images. This was the beginning of the iconoclastic movement of the sixteenth century in England. Although the damage was discontinuous at first, by 1538 the program was focused on the complete ruination of the sacred shrines which housed religious imagery. The clergy were also enforced by strict instruction to put an end to and preach against the pilgrimages. Throughout 1537 and 1538, the
cathedrals of England were literally ransacked of their finest treasures in the greatest ever pillage of medieval artwork.  

The story of the English Reformation is an immensely complex subject in which Henry VIII became increasingly despotic, contemptuously breaking with many things from the past. Although religious imagery of all kinds was sought out and destroyed, this thesis is concerned with what seems to have been a special grudge against Saint Thomas Becket, who stood for the ecclesiastical theory and canon laws against which Henry VIII had declared war. The quarrel between Henry II and Becket was brought back to life by Henry VIII who labeled Becket as a rebel and traitor to his prince.  

Becket's challenge to the authority of his king and the fact that he was the greatest of the English martyrs insured that his imagery would be pursued with special malevolence. Although Becket was widely revered in England at this time, Henry was not the only one who had contempt for him. Opinion dated back to the twelfth century that Thomas had not rightly earned a place among the canonized. The most severe attacks on Becket prior to the Reformation were started in the fourteenth century by the medieval leader of English dissent, John Wyclif, who said that Thomas had been interested in gaining temporal power, and that he died only to protect his worldly domain. Wyclif's followers, the Lollards, repeated these and similar allegations throughout the sixteenth century stating that Becket had not died a martyr's death.  

The Lollards were among many who criticized Becket imagery and pilgrimages to Canterbury. Reverence attached to his memory had become exaggerated to such an outrageous degree that devotion had led to superstition. Desiderius Erasmus (1466-
1536) wrote of being oppressed by the ostentatious wealth of Canterbury and the array of
relics that were brought out for him to venerate, such as handkerchiefs with the sweat or
the noserunnings of a saint and the astonishing quantity of teeth, hands, fingers and arms
which he was obliged to kiss.\textsuperscript{10}

Similar negative attitudes towards excessive veneration in other cathedrals,
churches, and monasteries encouraged the general destruction of religious imagery in
England. However, Henry VIII and Cromwell went to extremes to discredit Becket
personally. For example, Cromwell wrote a false history of Becket and even invented a
trial in which his treason was proven in a contemporary court (judgment was passed
after Becket’s failure to show himself “miraculously”). In November of 1538 a royal
proclamation ordered that all pictures and images of Becket were to be destroyed, his
festivals were not to be observed, and all notes of him in church books were to be
deleted.\textsuperscript{11} So that the abuses of religion should be taken away, the decree was
vigorously carried out. The king was determined that Becket’s relics should never again
become the focus of pilgrimage and veneration.

Even considering the resentment which already existed towards pilgrimages and
excessive imagery worship as seen in the cult of Becket, Henry’s campaign of
iconoclasm seems to have fallen suddenly on an unsuspecting people.\textsuperscript{12} Elaborate
propaganda programs and smear campaigns were devised by the government, but the era
of pilgrimage and imagery veneration did not die easily. The worship of images, relics,
and shrines served an important role by satisfying the spiritual needs and by soothing the
physical deficiencies of medieval pilgrims. Indeed, pilgrimage and the worship of
religious imagery had been firmly rooted in the English culture.

Successive Tudor kings like Edward VI (1537-53) pushed reform plans further after Henry VIII's death in 1547, especially calling for the destruction of images and the termination of pilgrimages. This need to repeat and define the pulling down of images until the end of the sixteenth century shows that image worship was a hard habit to break. But Henry VIII's attack had been successful in removing from sight most all of the physical reminders of Saint Thomas Becket. However, this did not complete the Protestant reaction against the saint. The tradition of criticism of Becket continued into the Elizabethan period (1558-1603) where Protestant historians removed all praise and endorsements of the saint's cause from the annals of English history.

This thesis will show that Henry VIII's lack of tolerance for Becket imagery did not stem from religious beliefs as much as from his loathing of papal authority. It will investigate the consequences of iconoclasm on the society of Henry VIII in order to expose how iconoclasm not only destroyed religious art physically, but undermined it ideologically. The campaign of destruction's effects on the laity will allow a glimpse into Henry's call to destroy Becket imagery as a propaganda device for asserting the king's politics and will through the common man's dependence on images. Henry focused on Becket, whom he saw as a rebel against secular authority—a threat to Henry VIII's successful jurisdiction. He realized that having power over the laity necessitated erasing what they understood best and the things to which they clung most strongly. This included the imagery that idealized Saint Thomas Becket.
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This thesis will analyze the destruction of imagery dedicated to Saint Thomas Becket in order to investigate the nature of sixteenth-century iconoclasm.

METHODOLOGY

The research will investigate medieval and sixteenth-century attitudes concerning Saint Thomas Becket, his fame, and his imagery. A recent trip to London in the spring of 1997 provided primary research regarding the conditions of remaining art pieces in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum, the National Gallery, and Canterbury Cathedral—locations housing images created in relation to Saint Thomas Becket. As suspected, Becket images existing in England's museums are works that had been originally made or housed in countries away from England and therefore were not subject to the English iconoclastic period in question. Combined with a study of the reproductions found in literary sources, this stage of the research allowed a stylistic inquiry that provided examples of what the medieval pilgrim was drawn to and what Henry VIII opposed.

Renderings of Saint Thomas come in many forms and media but tend to fall into three main categories. The category with the most numerous images shows Becket solely as the archbishop (figs. 1, and 2). These images exist in wall paintings, stained glass, etchings, mosaics, statuary, ivory and alabaster tables, triptychs, and on pilgrims' signs and badges. Images in the second category are individual representations of the martyrdom and are common throughout Europe (figs. 3, 4, and 5). The images depict
Becket in various processes of being slain by the knights. They are found in seals, pilgrim’s signs and badges, reliquary boxes, ceiling bosses, fonts, alabaster and ivory tables, embroidered miters, enameled chasses, sculpture, stained glass, embroideries, woodcuts, enamels, illuminations, rood screen paintings, panel paintings, and wall paintings. Images in the third category exist as series of scenes depicting different points of the martyrdom story and events leading up to it (figs. 6a, 6b, 6c, 7a, 7b). These appear in alabaster tables, altarpieces, illuminations, reliquary boxes, wall paintings, panel paintings, and in one case, a tympanum scene.

The bulk of the research was done using literary primary and secondary sources. The author explored the life of Becket and the nature of his conflict with Henry II in order to form a basis for later comparisons of Henry VIII’s conflict with Becket.

The motivation for this thesis was initially sparked by an interest in England’s most famous martyr. The destruction of the voluminous imagery concerning Becket raised questions as to its particular significance during the Reformation. Research endeavored to shed light on the following ideas. First, King Henry VIII, by destroying Becket imagery, was attempting to undermine Becket’s legend because it did not please him. Perhaps the images of Becket stood as a reminder that the English people were paying homage to a former archbishop who had successfully and ostentatiously usurped the court’s right to secular law over canon law. Because he was at odds with the papacy for desiring a divorce, Henry VIII’s plan was to discredit canon law which had impeded his freedom. Second, by effacing the artwork which represented despised ideas and institutions, Henry VIII debased Becket’s person and wiped out evidence of him as a
religious figurehead. Therefore, in effect, iconoclasm served as a useful tool for authorities to use the power of religious imagery to influence the community. To rule England apart from the papacy successfully there could not be inner dissension. With this in mind, Henry saw that the appearance of the artworks showing Becket as the lofty martyred saint was only prolonging the attachment to the laws and religion of old.

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Most sources used in research for this thesis were historical studies concerning topics that are directly related to the study of St. Thomas Becket and to the destruction of images in England during the sixteenth century. These sources examined the imagery of Becket and other saints, specific political and ecclesiastical events surrounding Becket in life and posthumously, and the effects of English iconoclasm on art and society.

A valuable source in studying the imagery produced in veneration of Saint Thomas Becket was Tancred Borenius’s 1932 publication of *St. Thomas Becket in Art*. The work produced a stylistic description of imagery depicting Becket with special concern for the culture of the particular country and stories pertaining to the creation of the artwork. The book presented the most useful stylistic and iconographic study to date, but only dealt lightly with the problems surrounding the iconoclasm under Henry VIII.

Studies on the history of iconoclasm and image worship and more specific sources dealing with the Reformation were useful in analyzing the persecution of religious imagery in general, and how the past was applied to the political policies
behind the English Reformation. The Stripping of the Altars by Eamon Duffy explored the character and range of late medieval English Catholicism and the destruction of its symbols resulting from Henry VIII's break with the papacy. It provided a sociological study on the structures of and attacks on traditional religion which was useful in discerning how disruptive Henry VIII's switch to Protestantism was. Most importantly, it dealt with saints and their images, the destruction of imagery from 1530-1580, and charted the fate of the pilgrimages. However, the source included little discussion on the destruction of Becket imagery or Henry's particular dislike of that imagery. The Reformation of Images: Destruction of Art in England, 1535-1660 by John Phillips explored the subjection of England's artistic heritage to the Reformation. Phillips considered iconoclasm too complex a phenomenon to be identified simply with a type of religious thinking and thus traced the intellectual precedents of Lollardy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and humanism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He sought interrelationships between the complexities of the English reformation and the destruction of images and compared them to other iconoclastic periods in history. While he posed many ideas for consideration, his writing often left the questions open-ended. However, the source presented a valuable look into the outcome of iconoclasm as art and religion went their separate ways in England. England's Iconoclasts by Margaret Aston clearly defined and outlined the iconoclastic precedents to the Reformation, the English iconoclast's reasons and politics, the images at the height of controversy, and performed a study into the history of the sin of idolatry. It presented a history of the Reformation which lacked the hypotheses of Phillips' work, but was a
useful factual index.

Since the imagery in question pertained to the relationship of Becket and the first Plantagenet ruler, King Henry II, biographical sources provided insight into the reading and understanding of Becket imagery. A 1990 edition of *Thomas Becket* by Frank Barlow took a biographical approach to Becket's life with a strong consideration of the climate in which Thomas Becket lived. Especially valuable was a study of the development of the cult of Becket. However, the source did not provide a detailed study on the program of art which followed Becket's martyrdom.

*The Quest for Becket's Bones* by John Butler recounted the story of the quest for Becket's bones in the eight centuries after his murder. It was a useful source in considering Henry VIII's reasons for attacking Becket personally and his possible actions and techniques in carrying out the actual destruction. It also included a look into how Henry's attack on Becket affected society from the pope to the pilgrimages.

Sources on the pilgrimages were useful in tracing the popularity of Becket from his martyrdom to the iconoclasm of the English Reformation. Benedicta Ward's *Miracles and the Medieval Mind* discussed the place of miracles in medieval life with reflection on the pilgrimages. Included was a special discussion on the medieval scene at Canterbury, but any serious accounts of the effects of the Reformation were not included. Likewise, *Miracles and Pilgrimages* by Ronald C. Finucane discussed pilgrimages and miracles in medieval Christianity but contained more references directly to Becket and a crucial chapter on the destruction of the shrines with direct consideration of Henry VIII's problems with Becket. In addition, the source briefly followed
iconoclasm past the reign of Henry through Tudor England.

What the above sources did not address adequately was the study of Becket's destroyed imagery as a defining element of the spirit of late medieval, early renaissance imagery veneration and its problematic nature. This paper goes beyond current scholarship by using the study of Becket imagery as a necessary tool for understanding a strain of the Reformation's attack on imagery. By conducting a specific study on the iconoclasm concerning Becket imagery, the thesis will provide insight into ways in which particular religious images could carry multifaceted, ideological significance which spoke to and represented various ideas for various societies.

To Henry VIII, Becket imagery represented a rebellious bishop and the authority of canon law which he detested. To the clergy, Becket imagery was a symbol of the perseverance of the Church's authority, not to mention a lucrative way to attract the pilgrims. To the common man, Becket imagery represented the martyr with superhuman and miraculous powers. Carrying these ideas over nearly four centuries, Becket imagery provides an excellent opportunity to explore the ideals of different social strata—royal, ecclesiastical and lay.

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3Ibid., 464.


7Butler, 32.

8Francis Watt, Canterbury Pilgrims and Their Ways (London: Methuen and Co. LTD., 1917) 43.


10Butler, 31-31.

11Watt, 43.

12Finucane, 205.

13For the most part, images which will be listed can be assumed to still exist intact as a result of having been originally created in other European countries than England.
CHAPTER II

SAINT THOMAS BECKET: HIS LIFE AND HIS CULT

When Henry VIII destroyed St. Thomas Becket imagery in November 1538, he was erasing a conspicuous symbol of the power of the Catholic Church. England's zeal for the martyr who was easily recognized by familiar images of the blood-streaked face and a knight's sword through the cranium, excited a sympathy that transcended the principles for which Thomas had died. The stand he took—or was supposed to have taken—against the mighty King Henry II elevated him to the heroic roles of martyr, saint, and folk hero. Thomas had in fact laid his life on the line not for the poor or the oppressed, but rather for the liberties of the Church for which he had been fighting. This chapter will provide a factual account of Thomas's life and the conflict between church and state in order to understand Becket's character, exactly what he was fighting for, and how his contemporaries reacted. This will form a basis from which future conflicts with Becket imagery may be compared and contrasted. The chapter will also discuss the beginnings of the pilgrimages to Canterbury, his cult, and the rise of imagery depicting him as a martyr in order to explore the nature of veneration of Becket and his imagery.

Thomas Becket was born of Norman parents in London around the year 1118 in the nineteenth year of the reign of King Henry I (1068-1135). Destined for the Church, he was educated at Merton priory, a city grammar school, and was given the opportunity to study abroad in the schools of Paris. The schools of Paris were the most distinguished
in the North-West. Here Thomas acquired a standard knowledge of the seven liberal arts.\(^2\) Thomas was fond of rural sports, activities that would later endear him to Henry II. Being a talented and ambitious boy from a respectable background, he had every possibility to climb high in the service of the Church or the king.

While Thomas was finishing his schooling, he witnessed a major change in the political and ecclesiastical scene as Henry I died and was succeeded by his nephew Stephen of Blois (1097-1154) in 1135. During Stephen’s tumultuous reign, the papacy was able to encroach steadily upon royal jurisdiction. Indeed, since the late eleventh century, England had been involved in a struggle between papal and royal leadership.\(^3\) This monarchical-papal struggle produced the initial clash between Henry II and Thomas and continued until the final split that occurred at the time of England’s Reformation during the reign of Henry VIII.

In the latter half of the eleventh century, the papal campaign against lay investiture was the Church’s attempt to limit increasing secular control in appointing ecclesiastical positions. Pope Gregory VII (c.1020-85), who was primarily associated with the papal reform movement, decided that the root cause of all evils within society was lay domination of the clergy at all levels, but most especially the tyranny exercised over the Church by kings.\(^4\) Gregory asserted that the Church must have the freedom to fulfill its divine mission. Since only priests answered directly to God, kings were viewed as subordinated to ministers of the Church. Secular monarchs who had considered themselves to be God’s delegates on earth for centuries were suddenly downgraded to being agents of papal and churchly authority.
In England, the first Norman king, William I or William the Conqueror (1027-97), devoutly supported church reform but refused to submit the English Church completely to the papacy. Together with his Archbishop of Canterbury, Lanfranc of Bec (1005-89), who agreed with William’s position on the government of the English Church, William closely supervised papal influence. Lanfranc introduced valuable elements of the Gregorian reform (Pope Gregory VII’s policies) into the English Church, but preserved its status as an independent unit of the Church universal.\(^5\)

This harmonious approach to reform underwent a transformation during the reigns of William I’s sons, William II (1056-1100) and Henry I, and Lanfranc’s pupil and successor at Canterbury, Archbishop Anselm (1033-1109). At this time, the new archbishop emerged as the papal defender in England, a position that would later be pursued by Becket. Anselm argued against lay investiture insisting that lay princes should not be able to bestow spiritual authority on the prelate. As would be the case with Becket, Anselm considered papal authority rather than royal authority to be the sole voice in church policy.\(^6\)

Henry I expressed what was to become the typical position of the stronger English monarchs. While not totally denying the right of the papacy to predominate in certain spheres, he could not allow royal authority to be undermined by the Roman pontiff. According to Anselm, investiture was the elevation to an office which was conferred or bestowed on a prelate by divine will. Anselm wished for investiture to remain a spiritual matter that should remain outside the secular ruler’s jurisdiction. When a bishop was elected to the royal court, he was more or less selected by the king to ensure loyalty to
royal authority. To appease Anselm, Henry I conceded that investiture should not be bestowed by laymen, but he retained the right to have bishops elected at his court, thereby ensuring their continuing loyalty.

When Henry I's rule was succeeded by that of Stephen in 1135, was a young man bearing witness to a period in which papal authority encroached steadily on secular authority and became more firmly established in England. Henry II succeeded Stephen in 1154, claiming from the outset that the latter's reign had been illegitimate and that the model relationship between church and state had been established during the rule of Henry II's grandfather, Henry I. Henry II's ecclesiastical policy aimed at the permanent restriction of papal authority in the English Church. However, Archbishop Thomas Becket was determined to adhere to the Church reform program of Pope Gregory VII in full.

As a young man, Thomas's ticket to fortune was entry into the house of Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury, around the year 1146. The archbishop was a compatriot and possible kinsmen of Thomas's father, Gilbert Becket. When Thomas had completed his schooling and began to seek position, it did not take Gilbert long to bring his son to Theobald's notice. Theobald's many dealings with the governmental problems of church and state necessitated recruiting distinguished clerks with diplomatic and legal expertise. In the beginning, Thomas, who had no obvious qualities in either field, was taken on either as a financial expert or on the basis of his charm and intelligence. Initially established as an archiepiscopal clerk, Thomas quickly found favor with the archbishop for he was appointed archdeacon of Canterbury in 1154. Early the following
year, the archbishop commended him to the newly crowned Henry as a suitable prospect for court chancellor.

The chancellor was the chief ecclesiastical servant in the royal household and received the largest salary of all the household officials. As Becket took on this role and came into close personal contact with the king, an intimate friendship developed between the two men. In the service of Henry, Thomas proved to be a staunch advocate of monarchical control over the Church, rejecting papal interference—almost a polar opposite from his future ideals as archbishop. His services to the king were well rewarded for he was given gifts of all sorts as well as fees for his duties. Henry encouraged Thomas to accept expensive presents and wear extravagant clothing. However, Thomas’s earliest biographers take the stand that the flamboyance of the outward show was a camouflage for the good deeds and continence that made up his private life. Rumors of secret acts of discipline such as scourging, the use of a lice infested hair-shirt, and chastity in the face of impossible temptations, were all indicative of the change to come.⁰ His supposed interior austerity would soon come to surface when he was elevated to the Archbishopric of Canterbury, the highest ecclesiastical office in England.

When Thomas served as Theobald’s confidential agent, he gained a knowledge of Canterbury and the whole English Church. Accompanying Theobald on numerous diplomatic missions, he acquired not only a knowledge of the Church at large, but of the papal curia. When Thomas became the archbishop seven years later, he was not entering an alien world.¹
Thomas was in the king’s company as a close friend and political ally from Christmas 1154 until May 1162. After Theobald’s death, Henry appointed Becket to the vacant Archbishopric of Canterbury, intimidating monks and bishops into acceptance. Henry’s appointment of Becket had no doubt been calculated to ensure the support of the Church for any of Henry’s policies which might raise papal objections. Thomas attempted to dissuade the king, realizing that Henry’s vision of his faithful chancellor continuing as his faithful archbishop was a mirage. Becket’s devotion to the laws of the papacy could not have been anticipated by Henry. Once Becket sat in the chair of the Archbishopric of Canterbury, his loyalties were to lay with God, the universal church, and his own see.

During the consecration on the twenty-third of May in 1162, Becket became a new man, taking on the responsibility of papal defender for the rights of the Church of England. His change of heart and mind toward secular affairs was signaled by his resignation of the chancellorship, much to Henry’s fury. The conflict which developed over the next few years, due in part to the overbearing personalities of both participants, represented another phase in the battle between church and state that had divided Europe for more than a century and would continue in England until the sixteenth century.

Thomas’s first months as archbishop saw a series of petty disputes concerning the ambiguous borderline between royal and ecclesiastical jurisdictions. The major confrontation between Henry II and Becket came in 1163, when Henry proposed that clergy convicted of misdemeanors and felonies in the Church courts should be handed over to secular courts for punishment. Considering the large number of felonious clergy,
Henry's stance was understandable and was, in fact, part of his great drive against all forms of criminality in England. Becket asserted that God does not judge twice for the same offense, and that criminous clerks should be answerable to the royal courts only for another crime subsequently committed. At this time, canon law was only beginning to be formulated and was unclear on the issue. Becket, however, was determined to defend the complete autonomy of ecclesiastical jurisdiction and soon asserted that all clergy cases should be judged solely by the Church.

Matters came to a head at the time of the publication of the Constitutions of Clarendon. These articles, drawn up in 1164 by Henry, represented an attempt to define and clarify the relationship between church and state and to establish the crown as the source of the Church's law and government. Henry demanded that England's bishops accept sixteen "constitutions" which set out the relationship between Church and crown in England as it had been at the time of his grandfather Henry I. The Constitutions dealt primarily with the claim of the Church's right of jurisdiction over its own members and the nature of punishment for ecclesiastical offenders. Other key issues included that no baron should be excommunicated, no bishop should leave the realm, and no appeal should go to Rome without royal consent. In addition to these demands, Henry also set down that all episcopal elections should be made by the king. Becket's reaction was just as obdurate as the king's stance on the establishment of the Constitutions. Thomas insisted that the Church should stand firm upon its freedom as a separate entity without the threat of secular jurisdiction. He managed to rally the support of all the bishops who stood together against the king's anger in support of the archbishop. But suddenly,
without consulting the bishops, Becket capitulated under pressure to Henry's demands and signed the articles insisting that the bishops support this move. Becket offered no explanation to his bishops and neither took their counsel nor advised them. His capitulation was as impetuous and willful as his resistance, and it allowed the king to suspect that only the archbishop's egotistic pride had hindered the church's acceptance.

Later that same year, at the Council of Northampton, Becket reversed himself again and withdrew his consent. Such inconsistent behavior proved to be disastrous, for it convinced many of the bishops that they could not rely on the archbishop. Henry brought up new charges against Becket presently accusing him of contempt of court for failing to appear when beckoned and also accusing him of financial dishonesty when Becket had been chancellor. Before the verdict could be delivered, Becket stole away in the night, exiling himself to France. He was to remain there for the next six years studying canon law and meditating upon his duty as defender of the Church of England.

It was unfortunate for Becket that Pope Alexander III (1105-81) was engaged in a struggle against the German Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (1123-90), who was supporting a rival pope. Alexander could not support Becket unreservedly, for he dared not drive Henry II, who still acknowledged him as pope, into opposition. The pope was able to return to Italy from exile in 1165. He supported Becket in principle but reprimanded him for possibly provoking Henry into action against the papacy at a time that was so crucial for the independence of the Roman Church itself.

Opposition to Becket's conduct of Church affairs was not limited to Henry II or to the pope. Led by Gilbert Foliot (1147-63), Archbishop of London, many of Becket's
fellow bishops had developed an anti-Becket party. Foliot had been passed over as a candidate for the archbishopric which Becket instead received. Bitterly disappointed, he shared the view of many bishops who felt that Thomas did not deserve to be archbishop in the first place. Not only had he not been a monk, as was the custom, but he had reveled in the luxuries bestowed on him as chancellor. Indeed, the process by which Thomas had become archbishop was the weakest spot in his armor as a champion of ecclesiastical liberty, for he was made archbishop by the will of King Henry. In order to establish amicable relations with his ecclesiastical brethren, Becket sought to prove that he was not the king’s pawn, perhaps deliberately picking quarrels with the king so as to prove himself a good churchman.

Henry failed to realize that Becket had lacked Theobald’s mature flexibility in church and state dealings. Theobald, who had witnessed peril and change, realized that the royal and papal struggle would go on long after he was gone. He had protected the liberties of the Church as best he could whenever the secular powers had threatened them.

Rumors of his inner austerity aside, as chancellor, Becket had been immature, overeager to please, and beyond all else, attracted by the idea of his worldly glory. Perhaps Thomas considered Theobald’s royal cooperation to be the hateful price that the weak must pay for survival. Becket’s stubborn stance against the king and the nature in which he exiled himself under the protection of King Louis VII of France (1121-1180) suggest that Becket’s dignity and the establishment of his own superiority to Henry II were more important than the defense of the Church. Although it is true that Becket was fighting for the papacy’s rights, and of course the papacy was naturally anxious to protect
clerical privilege, the papacy was also mindful of the harm done to the church by criminous clerks and was eventually sided with Henry's views on with how they should be dealt. It seems that Becket's strength of will was a strength devoted to preserving his own dignity, as opposed to church's best interests. Perhaps Thomas exiled himself due to the humiliation of being put on trial by Henry. That he wished in turn to humiliate Henry seems more likely than does any selfless attempt by Becket to protect the interests of the Church. It is precisely this that would lead future critics to claim that Becket's life had not been one worthy of sainthood.

From exile, Becket repeatedly wrote to the bishops who opposed him, mainly Foliot, Roger of York (?-1181), and Henry of Winchester (?-1171), questioning their disobedience and urging them to support his cause. The correspondences, which continued until Becket returned to England in 1170, were typified on Becket's part by threats and excommunications. The bitterness of feeling between Becket and the bishops is best revealed by the exchange of letters between Foliot and Becket. Foliot believed that the welfare of the Church was best achieved by cooperation with the crown. He insisted that Becket submit to Henry's authority and provided valuable arguments for both contemporary and future opponents of Becket based on canon law.

Becket's return to England was prompted by an event that was not related to the fight over the Constitutions of Clarendon in 1164. On June 14, 1170, Henry II's oldest son Henry was crowned by the Archbishop of York in order to ensure the crown's proper lineage. As coronation was a privilege reserved for the Archbishop of Canterbury, it violated a traditional right and infuriated not only Becket, but the pope. Henry II, who
wished to avoid papal sanctions, agreed to meet Becket in July and accepted Thomas's position on the issue. Encouraged by this small victory, Thomas was now determined to return to Canterbury. Before doing so, on the eve of crossing the Channel he excommunicated not only the Bishop of York for performing the coronation ceremony, but bishop Foliot and the Bishop of Winchester for their participation.

Henry was not so much infuriated by the excommunications as he was by the nature in which Becket dramatized his return to England. Becket’s return to Canterbury in November, as told by his biographers, was likened unto Christ’s entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The excommunicated bishops reported stories back to Henry that Becket was parading through the countryside at the head of a cavalcade of armed knights. When Thomas’s ship initially landed in Sandwich, a crowd of people acclaimed his coming and prostrated themselves before him for his blessing. The following morning, each village on the way to Canterbury that Thomas and his entourage went through met them with festivity. Upon arriving at Canterbury Cathedral, Thomas took off his boots and finished the journey barefoot while the organ sounded and bells rang out victoriously.22 These events piqued Henry’s annoyance. He had already been discussing how the archbishop might be arrested, but had no intentions of causing Becket’s death. There is no way of knowing whether Henry actually spoke the famous words, “Will no one rid me of this lowborn priest.” As a result of some such utterance, four of Henry’s most loyal knights set out that night to kill Thomas.

The following evening, December 29, 1170, the knights arrived at Canterbury and confronted the archbishop. Although their intentions and mannerisms were increasingly
violent, Becket made no attempt either to hide or shut the knights out of the Cathedral as he went in for evening vespers. He freely accepted death at their hands. We cannot know for certain whether Becket regarded such a death as inevitable and faced it bravely, or whether he actually sought the martyrdom. Regardless, Becket's murder achieved for him the lasting recognition and victory which had so often eluded him in life. 

That Becket would take none of the available opportunities to escape only heightened the sacrificial perspective in which the event immediately came to be viewed. Among the small monastic community at Canterbury, the fallen archbishop almost instantly became a symbol of opposition to monarchical tyranny. As news of the murder spread incredibly swiftly, Becket's stubborn and often arrogant personality was quickly concealed by his apparent humility and devotion. The monks of Canterbury, who initially tried to keep the agonizing public out of the cathedral, acquiesced to the growing masses of pilgrims and opened the crypt to the public in 1171. Becket's spreading fame, which had been developing since his exile to France and his return to England, converted him in death into a popular hero and saint of miraculous capability—the reality of his life was nearly obliterated. He became the focus of a cult of worship that would thrive in England until the reign of Henry VIII.

Even those who found fault with Thomas in his later years recognized the holiness of his death. Becket's violent murder shocked all of Western Christendom, inspiring Pope Alexander III to canonize Becket in 1173. Henry renounced jurisdiction over criminous clerks and allowed himself to be publicly humiliated in 1174 when he came on a pilgrimage to Canterbury and was flogged by the monks in front of Becket's tomb. The
canonization and Henry’s public penance caused people from the all levels of society both in England and abroad to visit Canterbury. Henry II’s penance also demonstrated that there were limits to the measures of coercion that a king could employ without breaking peace with the papacy. This stronghold that the Church maintained over royal power Henry VIII later refused to tolerate.

The primary sources for the spread of Thomas’s cult were the legends and miracle stories surrounding the archbishop’s death. These stories were initially spread by the community of Canterbury and the peasant folk residing in the nearby countryside who had flocked to the scene of the murder. The first miracle—a paralyzed woman was cured when she was touched with Becket’s blood which had been stolen by her husband—had supposedly occurred in Canterbury the very night of the murder. Other miracles were associated with Becket’s relics, especially his clothing, his bones, and his blood. Even the water at Canterbury in which relics were soaked, or in which the martyr’s blood was said to be diluted, had miraculous qualities and was carted away in ampoules by visitors from all over Europe.

Other factors that contributed to the spread of Becket’s fame were the writings of Thomas’s biographers, whose interpretations of his life were biased toward his sainthood. These “Lives of Saint Thomas,” which appeared within twenty years of his death, included eyewitness accounts by the monks who had attended Thomas during his death and secondary accounts by contemporaries with personal knowledge of his career. The biographies, together with the stories concerning Thomas’s miracles, encouraged
pilgrimages to Canterbury and the veneration of images and relics connected with St. Thomas Becket.

In the majority of the biographies, the main emphasis was placed on Becket as a martyr, a man who died for a cause. That cause had been a protest to royal authority over the Church. The role of St. Thomas the martyr as a symbol of protest to royal authority would be precisely what made Henry VIII uneasy. Henry VIII would overlook the fact that the cult was mostly drawn by the legend of the miracles. In his eyes, those who worshipped St. Thomas Becket threatened possible rebellion against the break with the papacy. Indeed, the real cause for which Thomas died was not so important to his cult as were the possible healing powers of Thomas's shrine. In general, the masses who came to Canterbury came to experience the center of miraculous happenings and were little interested in the facts of Becket's struggle as archbishop. As the attentions of the modern media are typically riveted by rumors of supernatural occurrences and violence, the medieval spectator's attentions were no different. A martyrdom that occasioned miracles could sufficiently transfix much of European medieval society.

As a result of Thomas's posthumous fame, Canterbury rapidly became a great pilgrimage center. Popular medieval belief held that saints could hear best when prayers were said near their shrines, inducing men and women to travel throughout the world that lay beyond the bounds of their own parish. In general, medieval society found relief in the assurance that they had spiritual protectors. Some pilgrims were motivated to go on their travels for reasons of piety or penance. Some went on pilgrimages in order to show defiance to kings by honoring their slain enemies, to receive free alms and food from
monasteries and wealthy travelers, or simply to go on sightseeing holiday. But most significantly, medieval men and women went on pilgrimages in hope of gaining miraculous cures from mental and physical afflictions.

The beginnings of the pilgrimages to Canterbury after Thomas’s martyrdom seemed to be clandestine, as royal guardsmen kept watch by the cathedral to deter possible mayhem. Even the monastic community was at first hostile to the growing cult of St. Thomas. However, growing numbers of determined pilgrims forced Canterbury’s inhabitants to face the inevitable, and on April 2, 1171, the crypt was publicly opened to the public allowing masses of pilgrims to pray by the humble tomb of St. Thomas. The Easter celebration the following year brought thousands of pilgrims attended the festivities. That May, after Henry II did penance, even more pilgrims visited Canterbury necessitating two monks, Benedict and William, to record growing numbers of miracles. There were 703 miracles recorded in the first decade after the murder.

Because he set an example by royal homage to Becket, King Henry II’s act of penance also caused pilgrimage to Canterbury to become a fashionable endeavor. Nobility of every rank and from many countries visited the shrine including kings, queens, and churchmen of high rank. Ironically, the last royal pilgrimage before the shrine was dismantled was by Henry VIII himself in 1520.

At first, hostility was expressed toward the growing cult of St. Thomas, for at the time of his death, Becket by no means had the love and respect of everyone in the ecclesiastical community. Canterbury was a cathedral in which the townspeople performed many of the services inside the Church that in other
churches were reserved only for the clergy—the citizens of Canterbury were
intimately familiar with the goings on inside the Cathedral. As a result, the initial
evolution of the cult was most likely not the result of efforts by the monastic
community. The first miracles were reported outside the Church by minor country
gentry.

The noisy and often foul smelling cult was a nuisance to the peaceful
realm of the priory. However, certain factors made the cult acceptable not only
to the monks but to King Henry. Because the murder was a political disaster for
Henry II, it was convenient that Thomas’s cult was based on the happenings of
miracles rather than on the politics of the bloody event. In addition, the cult of
Thomas eventually came to provide Canterbury with its major source of income,
causing even the monks’ satisfaction when they realized they had a valuable
financial asset. Furthermore, in light of the two monks Benedict and William
keeping a tally of the miracles and the fact that one of the monks on the night of
the murder had enough foresight to collect Thomas’s blood, it can safely be
assumed that although some of the monks may have hesitated in encouraging the
new cult, others realized that they had a marketable saint on their hands.

At the heart of the Thomas’s cult was his blood. As mentioned above, it
had been secretly carried away by the monks on the night of the murder and was
said to have caused the first in a long line of miracles. Members of Thomas’s cult
had a general longing to touch his blood and take it home with them. To supply
the demand, the monks of Canterbury diluted ever decreasing (but mysteriously
never disappearing) amounts of Thomas’s blood and sold it to the pilgrims in flasks. Exploiting cults like Becket’s in such a way would eventually lead to the corruption of wealth in many monasteries.  

Within a few years of the murder, the whole lifestyle of Canterbury’s community had changed. Along with the influx of pilgrims and cult members who were eager to experience the shrine of St. Thomas, the community at large underwent a new wave of confidence and creativity more brilliant and original than it had ever experienced before. Verve for Becket’s cult resulted in enthusiastic collaboration by the community even in the face of disaster. On September 5, 1174, a fire destroyed the eastern arm of Canterbury Cathedral. Within ten years the monk chronicler Gervase recorded that one of the finest architectural splendors of the twelfth century had come into existence “[as a result] of Becket’s death, the greatest benefit which had come to the monastery.”

The makeover provided the perfect opportunity for a reconstruction plan that allowed space for the spectacular new shrine dedicated to Becket’s relics.

No expense was spared on the construction of the new shrine, which was the work of two clerical craftsmen, Walter of Colchester and Elyas of Dereham. The shrine was composed of three separate parts: a stone plinth with an open arcaded base, a richly gilded and decorated wooden casket in which the saint’s remains lay, and a painted wooden canopy which could be lowered or raised by pulleys. The casket was decorated in gold plate; inlaid with emeralds, rubies, diamonds, sapphires and pearls; and decorated with golden trellis-work. Perhaps the most impressive of the gems was the huge ruby
known as the Regale of France, which was donated by Louis VII in 1179. For the next three hundred years, pilgrims were moved to devotion by the gorgeous display. A Venetian pilgrim in 1500 described:

Everywhere that the eye turns, something even more beautiful appears. The beauty of the materials is enhanced by the astonishing skill of human hands. Exquisite designs have been carved all over it and immense gems worked delicately into patterns.

While monasteries and cathedrals were great centers for the worship of a single saint’s relics, the relics of a saint as widely popular as Saint Thomas tended to “multiply” and come to rest at a new chapel or church. This diffusion of relics also assisted Becket’s cult’s pan-European nature and the spread of artworks depicting St. Thomas. Indeed, the rest of England and Europe began to produce paintings, mosaics, statues, stained-glass windows, and frescoes all depicting St. Thomas.

Chapter one of this thesis described the three main categories of renderings of Saint Thomas imagery: sole representations of Becket as archbishop, individual representations of the martyrdom, and series of scenes depicting different points of Thomas’s life. Works portraying Becket are almost all medieval, dating from the time shortly after his death in the late twelfth century to the early sixteenth century.

The single representations of Becket are renderings of the simplest type showing him as archbishop without further emblems of his martyrdom. A mosaic from the cathedral at Monreale in Sicily (fig.1) shows a simple hierarchic
iconography with the right hand raised in the act of blessing. Becket is shown in his mass vestments with the pallium (the white band ornamented with black crosses), a vestment specially pertaining to archbishops. The image is the first posthumous representation known and is believed to have been completed between 1174 and 1182. Its location is due to the marriage of Henry II's daughter Princess Joan to William the Good of Sicily, the builder of the Monreale Cathedral. Another single representation is a rare example of an English Becket image that survived the Reformation. It is a thirteenth-century statue from Wells cathedral which presents a simple depiction of Becket holding the crown of the archbishopric (fig.2).

Representations of the martyrdom, which are of great frequency all over Europe, present Becket saying mass or praying at the altar while four knights attack him. In England, the subject was repeatedly represented in the bas-reliefs of ceiling bosses like the one from Exeter Cathedral (fig.3) in which all the characters at the murder may be seen. The aforementioned wide diffusion of St. Thomas’s relics led to a corresponding demand for receptacles to hold them. Limoges enamelers of the thirteenth century created a number of reliquary boxes with images of Becket and his murderers in fine champlevé enamel. A great number still exist and it is interesting to note that the representations of Becket’s martyrdom on reliquary boxes are larger in scale and more plentiful than reliquary boxes connected with any other saint. At Sens Cathedral a fine example of a St. Thomas reliquary box exists. The face of the reliquary box (fig. 4) shows the
martyrdom by the four assailants and above on the lid, the saint is being laid upon
his tomb. As for works in paint, the church of Sts. John and Paul in Spoleto, Italy
has a late twelfth-century fresco (fig. 5) showing Henry II seated on the left
issuing orders to the knights who are slaying Becket.

These and similar images of the martyrdom brought out the horror of the
event. Becket kneels in front of his murderers just as earlier Christian martyrs had
knelt before their torturers. In this way, medieval artists' iconography of Becket
imagery is similar to his biographers' interpretations, in that the artists fitted St.
Thomas into the biographers' pattern of martyrdom. The popular choice of
painting Becket at the moment of his martyrdom shows that artists from the
Middle Ages could only imitate or reinforce popular images of old. Indeed, the
artists' stress on martyrdom goes back to the early Church where it was the most
important scene to illustrate, since it was the proper climax for a truly Christian
life. Thus, as conventions carried over, the most important scene of Thomas’s
life to portray was the martyrdom.

The third category, series of scenes from Thomas’s life, may best be
experienced by the thirteenth-century Becket Leaves which have been on
indefinite loan to the British Library since 1986 from John Paul Getty. The Becket
Leaves, attributed to the English artist Matthew Paris, represent a unique
survival of a cycle of illustrations attached to a written life of Becket (figs. 6a, 6b,
6c are three of the eight images). Although illustrated lives of individual saints
survive in considerable numbers from medieval England, Becket’s enormous
popularity is reflected only in this one single and fragmentary survival of an illustrated book devoted to him. One can only surmise that there at one time existed many similar books devoted to Becket. The wholesale destruction of imagery portraying Thomas during the Reformation period may be to blame.55

Other series of scenes may be found in sculpture, as seen in the ceiling bosses of the cloisters at Norwich Cathedral. Completed around 1430, six bosses in the eighth bay portray scenes of the four knights being inspired by demons, the penance of Henry II, the opening of Thomas's tomb, the burial of Thomas, a repeated penance of Henry, and the slaying of Thomas. Although the Norwich bosses are the most complete sculpted series remaining in England, there are also a number of works in alabaster, as found in two fifteenth century bas-relief tables (figs. 7a and 7b).56 How many tables actually comprised the original altarpiece is impossible to say, for other English alabaster table match neither in craftsmanship nor in size. These examples of the variance in media and the spread of Becket imagery show the phenomenon of fascination with the story of St. Thomas Becket that spread forth from Canterbury.

However, with the growing popularity of Becket’s relics and imagery, both in England and abroad, came the inevitable commercialization at Canterbury. Vendors’ booths set up along pilgrimage routes sold fake relics, metal badges with Becket on them, and ampoules to hold his “blood tainted” water to gullible pilgrims who believed them to have supernatural powers. Unavoidably, pilgrimages became tarnished by the desire to seek material reward from a saint.
They increasingly attracted the irresponsible who had no real appreciation of the significance of the journey.\(^5\) The pilgrimages to Canterbury and the production of imagery depicting Becket's martyrdom continued in England until the beginning of the Reformation when they were specifically outlawed by Henry VIII. In order to understand the atmosphere that allowed for the violent destruction of Becket's imagery, one must realize that a history of criticism of the Canterbury pilgrims and Becket had already developed in pre-Reformation England.

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4 Harper-Bill, 4.


6 Knowles, 18.


8 Barlow, 23.

9 Barlow, 33.

10 Barlow, 45.

11 Barlow, 39.
Although the monks at Canterbury initially attempted to keep the growing cult out of the cathedral, they were the eyewitness sources from whence the details of the murder were attained and likewise the primary sources from whence the rumors spread.


28 Barlow, 4-9 provides outlined description of the biographers and their interrelationships.

30 Finucane, 13.

31 Finucane, 40.

32 Finucane, 122.

33 Finucane, 123.

34 H. Ward, 107.

35 Howard, 18.


37 Hearn, 47.


39 Barlow, 267.

40 Kidsin, 975.

41 Barlow, 267.


43 Southern, 16, 19.


45 Harper-Bill, 40.

46 Finucane, 125.

48 H. Ward, 103.


50 Borenius, 81.

51 Borenius, 85.


53 Smalley, 195.


56 Borenius.

57 Howard, 18.
CHAPTER III

CRITICISM OF BECKET

Because the veneration of St. Thomas Becket did not please Henry VIII, he sought to destroy objects glorifying the saint. But even before the Reformation there was contrary opinion concerning the morally questionable tradition of pilgrimages to Canterbury and the status of Becket himself—whether or not he deserved the exalted role of sainthood. This chapter will analyze the nature and results of anti-Becket feeling and views toward his devoted pilgrims and toward Thomas as a martyr. Furthermore, in order to assess Henry VIII’s and his ministers’ problems with Becket and their use of him as a model for anti-papal proceedings, this chapter will examine Henry’s break with the papacy and the Dissolution of the Monasteries in England. As Becket’s murder by Henry II’s knights represented the culmination of the first major chapter in the war between the English Church and state, the assault on Becket by Henry VIII would launch the final chapter.

Fourteenth-century attitudes toward the cult of St. Thomas were expressed in Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. The tone of Chaucer’s work was one of light-hearted criticism directed toward the various motives behind the shrine, relics, and pilgrimages of the fourteenth century. By exposing the pilgrims as scavengers of material reward, Chaucer revealed the irony connected with the pilgrimages. He provided a satirical insight into the conflict between the physical veneration of old bones and rags
the spiritual veneration of truth.¹ Chaucer’s commentary was not directed as an objection to Thomas Becket’s “saintlyhood.” As Chaucer questioned whether the pilgrims’ acts of devotion were acts of superstition rather than acts of holiness, others questioned Becket’s title as martyr.

Criticism of Becket continued into the later Middle Ages as groups of dissenters such as the Lollards, who were the followers of John Wyclif (1330-84), developed. John Wyclif, a fourteenth-century Oxford scholastic and theologian, claimed that the true church was not the “visible” church in all its ostentation, but rather the invisible community of those whom Christ had saved.² He disputed the pope’s authority to declare anyone a saint,³ he urged the clergy to confine themselves to their pastoral duties, and he supported an English translation of the Bible.⁴ Wyclif believed that men should pray to saints at their shrines only as a bridge to a stronger relationship with God. Saints could not grant anything themselves, and they could not work miracles through their relics or imagery. Wyclif explained how Old Testament law forbade images because uneducated worshippers were prone to idolatry.⁵ He further claimed that Becket was not worthy of undue worship, for he had been a mere “possessioner” interested in gaining temporal power and died only to protect his worldly domain.⁶

Building upon the ideas of Wyclif, Lollard opinion of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries ventured beyond the Chaucerian disapproval of Becket’s cult to a reassessment of the causes for his martyrdom and his relationship to Henry II. The Lollards emphasized preaching primarily from the Bible, believing that the purpose of a sermon was to convey the power of the Bible directly and should be characterized by
exclusive reference to scriptural text. They did not condone the use of religious imagery of any sort. In fact, besides the denunciation of pilgrimages and the veneration of relics, the Lollards' opposition to images may be regarded as one of the movement's most consistent features.

The "Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards," their 1395 doctrinal statement, included a section censuring pilgrimages and image worship. The "Conclusions" also denied that miracles are proof of sanctity and declared that St. Thomas was not a martyr. A Lollard named Margery Backster in 1429 claimed that Thomas was a false and cowardly traitor who was slain in the church door as he was running away. She believed that "[Thomas should be] damned in hell because he injuriously endowed the churches with possessions and raised up many heresies in the church which seduce the simple people." Subsequent Lollard allegations claimed that Becket's death was of no value (1428), that Wyclif was holier than Becket (1429), that Canterbury pilgrims gave their souls to the devil (1463), and that Becket was a thief whose offerings were misused (1523).

The Lollards became an increasingly smaller movement, persisting into the 1530s and eventually merging with Protestantism. It is probable that Lollardly interpretations of Becket's less-than-saintly demeanor would make the demolition of his cult and imagery easier for Henry VIII.

The advent of humanism, or the "New Learning," brought about another reaction to the growing controversy surrounding Becket and his cult. Essentially, the humanists were people who combined Christian wisdom with classical studies in search of
philosophical and cultural ideals. They focused on the practices of medieval liturgy that were abused or needed reforming. Criticisms of pilgrimages and image and relic worship led humanists to chastise the Church generally—even doctrinally. Lollards were inclined to be more radical and violent toward the issue of images, whereas humanists opposed the superstitious use of images with cynicism rather than violence. Humanists were not inclined toward the physical destruction of the medieval Church.

More akin to Chaucer’s tolerance of pilgrimage absurdity, humanists viewed the pilgrimages with impatience and annoyance best exemplified in the writings of Desiderius Erasmus. Although not English himself, Erasmus was especially important for the development of English humanism. One of his colloquies, “A Pilgrimage for Religion’s Sake,” is an account of his journey to European pilgrimage shrines, particularly the shrine of St. Thomas.

Erasmus embellished his writings with racy criticisms of priests, monks, superstitions, and empty ritual. “A Pilgrimage for Religion’s Sake,” which was set up as a dialogue between the two friends Menedmus and Osygius, described the glory of St. Thomas’s tomb and the endless amounts of sacred relics which were exhibited by the monks for the pilgrims’ veneration. Erasmus poked fun at the monks whose saintly and devout demeanors were turned instantly to ones of defense and hostility. He portrayed Osygius, who, in marked awe, described the splendor of the scene while one of his traveling companions, Gratian, aroused the monks’ anger by suggesting that St. Thomas would certainly rejoice in death if he could “relieve the wants of the poor with [his shrine’s] riches.” Erasmus likewise used tinges of dry sarcasm and wit as he wrote of
Menedmus who, upon hearing these incidents, silently suspected Gratian to be one of Wyclif's followers. "A Pilgrimage" reads as a humorous but scathing account of activities surrounding the shrines. It remarks on the devotion and greed that led to the multiplication of relics and brought enrichment to European shrines.¹⁹

Yet Erasmus was not an iconoclast. He was mocking the nonsense connected with England's greatest shrine from an urbane and sophisticated perspective.²⁰ His aim was to return to an ethical behavior found in the practical following of Christ.²¹ Erasmus was opposed to the vain rituals of the Middle Ages and urged men to look to the Bible and base their lives on the ethical writings of Ancients joined with the teachings of Christ.²² Unlike the Lollards, Erasmus as a humanist valued the arts as instruments for education, believing that pleasure can be derived from the practice of painting and music.²³ But like the Lollards, he distrusted the motives for the making of religious art.

Lollardy and humanism foreshadowed the iconoclasm of the sixteenth century. Erasmus's writings anticipated the very arguments used by Henry VIII and the English reformers to justify iconoclasm in general,²⁴ and specifically the iconoclasm of Thomas Becket's shrine and imagery.

Henry VIII posed potent new arguments against the saint. The powerful monarch attempted the suppression of the worship of Saint Thomas, but what was behind Henry's personal vendetta against Becket? Was it for religious reasons that he attacked the saint? Was the volatile assault for political propaganda, or was it perhaps used as a tool to calm the turbulence that the break with the papacy had caused to his subjects and to his ego?
In the early part of the sixteenth century, before the rule of Henry VIII, the intellectual revival seen in Erasmus’s works had interesting consequences. For the first time since the reign of Henry II, lawyers began to innovate on a wide scale within their own professions, often mirroring humanist conviction that the law had to be changed to meet current social conditions. Opinion held that lawsuits that are similar both to royal and church courts should not be given different verdicts, nor should common law defer to canon law. This type of theory was immensely important for Henry VIII’s struggle with the papacy for by empowering the common law, Henry would in turn empower his Royal authority.25

Henry VIII’s struggle with the papacy led to the break with Rome in 1533-4. Initially, the origin of Henry’s problem with the pope was a result of the inability of his Cardinal Wolsey to persuade Pope Clement VII to annul the king’s first marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Henry sought to marry Anne Boleyn, who might bear him a male heir.26 Although papal annulments were not hard to obtain, Henry sought annulment from a woman, who was the aunt of the Holy Roman Emperor, in favor of Boleyn, who was a reformer.27 Distracted by Wolsey’s incompetence to perform his will, Henry personally took up the struggle with the papacy, supervising every development of the break with Rome. He presented himself as the realm’s protector against papal encroachments. In spite of a case of self-centered arrogance and a growing fixation with asserting himself as England’s independent authority, Henry was sharp enough to secure legal and parliamentary support by basing his actions in parliamentary statute rather than royal
proclamations. In so doing, Henry gained firm support of his actions and successfully eliminated papal authority in England.

In early 1531, one of Henry’s clergymen John Foxe (1516-97), and Thomas Cromwell, Henry’s principal minister, prepared a collection of pro-royal propaganda entitled *Collectanea satis Copiosa*, which justified the divorce from legal and historical principles. They redefined the boundaries between royal and ecclesiastical power, arguing that ever since the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, the kings of England had enjoyed secular *imperium* and spiritual supremacy like that of the later Roman Emperors. Furthermore, the English Church had always been a separate province of Christendom subject only to royal jurisdiction. In short, Henry’s kingship was like that of the emperor Constantine after his conversion to Christianity. In this light, papal rule represented a gross usurpation of the rights of his realm. Therefore, the pope’s authority was denied and he was considered merely a bishop of Rome with no authority in England.

In essence, Henry VIII’s campaign in England released existing forces against the papacy which in turn, accelerated his own break with Rome and simplified the acceptance of the Reformation. In Europe during the sixteenth century there was general discontent with the medieval church system. The supremacy of the papacy was being challenged in many circles with Martin Luther’s (1483-1546) protests threatening to destroy it completely. The pivotal point of the Reformation in Europe, as much as in Henrician England, was the division between the Church and the Bible. The reformers put an emphasis on teaching the articles of faith—such as the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments—from Scripture without the use of any imagery, visual proof, or rituals
that Scripture did not justify. The reformers believed in the primacy of the Bible and the value of preaching. The Church’s emphasis on pilgrimages, cults of saints, veneration, and ritual were part of traditional Catholic teaching. It was a negation of this traditional Catholic teaching in support of the reliance on scripture that the Reformers regarded as the basis for their assault on Catholicism.

Henry VIII’s own break with the papacy was achieved through the passing of a series of acts through which he became the supreme head of England. In 1532 a written agreement was passed entitled the “Submission of the Clergy.” It symbolized the destruction of the clergy’s legislative independence along with the transference of many of its powers to the crown. Also in 1532, the “Act of Conditional Restraint of Annates” forbade papal privileges in England and ended the payment of annates—the first of the year’s fruits which were surrendered to the pope. The “Act of Restraint of Appeals” in 1533 provided Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, with the authority to finalize the divorce and prevented appeals to Rome from Catherine. This act also provided Henry with statutory supremacy over the English Church. At this point, Henry and Parliament completed the break with the papacy and established the crown as the legitimate head of the Church.

In 1534 five acts were passed which asserted undeniably the King’s new position. The “Act of Absolute Restraint of Annates and Concerning the Election of Bishops” affirmed that bishops would be elected royally. The “Act Forbidding Papal Dispensations and Payments of Peter’s Pence” reiterated Henry’s supremacy and prohibited a customary tribute to Rome. The act also relaxed the law of heresy to permit speaking against papal
authority. The "Act of Secession" and the "Treason Act" outlawed slanders against the Boleyn marriage and enforced oaths supporting Henry's heirs. Finally, the "Act of Supremacy" affirmed royal authority over the Church. The English Church was now virtually autonomous.

The test for imperial kingship was whether Henry's supremacy could be imposed on the laity. With plans to bind the nation, Thomas Cromwell encouraged unity by enforcing oaths from ecclesiastical and lay officials to renounce papal authority, the cult of saints, pilgrimages, and miracles. In 1536 after the break with Rome was finalized, he and Henry turned to the next step in removing the more conspicuous traces of popery—the monasteries.

The destruction or dissolution of the English monasteries was carried out for a number of reasons. Like Wyclif, Henry visualized the state in terms of the ruler's sovereignty and demanded the dissolution of the religious orders on the grounds that sovereignty cannot tolerate the existence of independent ecclesiastical institutions. For Henry, the fact that religious orders still owed allegiance to Rome was unacceptable after the Acts of Appeals and Supremacy. Moreover, Henry needed money and it was to the religious orders that he turned. He was faced with the heavy burdens of foreign alliances at a time when the treasury was depleted and the monasteries proved to be the most wealthy victims. Between August 1536 and October 1537, the transference of monastic riches into the King's bank netted £1.3 million.

The Dissolution was undertaken primarily by Thomas Cromwell, who in 1534 boasted that he would make Henry the richest man in Christendom. As a reformer and
the leading force behind Henry’s break with the papacy, Cromwell played a major role in establishing Henry’s supreme headship, and was eager to exercise the royal power over the Church. Enriching the king without impoverishing his subjects and straining their loyalty proved to be a difficult problem. Cromwell turned to the monasteries and conducted a survey of England’s ecclesiastical wealth. Several months later, he sent surveyors to collect evidence against them.

Many reports contained accounts of monastic abuses, especially concerning the worship of saints, their relics, and their images. Cromwell exposed to the laity an overpowering church which was challenging the power of the king and abusing the wealth of the laity. He presented the Dissolution as the king’s recovery of his own lands from the Church’s misuse.

In 1536 an act was passed to suppress the lesser monastic houses that had a yearly income of under £200. The “Act for the Dissolution of the Larger Monasteries” was finalized in 1539. Throughout this short period, the ex-monastic lands were efficiently brought under the jurisdiction of the newly established Court of Augmentation.

There was little to suggest that the Dissolution of the Monasteries or Henry VIII’s reformation in general had anything to do with spiritual life or God. The Dissolution redistributed ecclesiastical wealth overwhelmingly in favor of the crown so that the funds would be used at the crown’s own discretion. The comprehensive suppression which sought to destroy the institution of monasticism resulted in the dispossession of over seven thousand nuns, monks, and friars. Centuries of established institutions in towns and
throughout the countryside were rapidly destroyed leaving obvious gaps.\textsuperscript{45} The loss of culture, learning, and much architectural and artistic beauty was a total devastation.

During this period in England the shrines, other conspicuous traces of popery were attacked and their wealth was voraciously absorbed into the royal treasury. The shrines were the sites, mostly in churches and cathedrals, where the hallowed objects and relics of a particular saint or holy figure could be venerated. One shrine's riches were violated with particular fervor, and the saint worshipped therein was debased with a special malevolence.

Henry VIII consciously resumed the struggle with Becket, succeeding where Henry II had failed. To Henry VIII, Thomas stood, as no other saint did, for the ecclesiastical theory which privileged the Church's law over the king's. Furthermore, Becket was a champion of the pope. In reality, there is no record to date of an existing movement or group of dissenters that claimed Becket to be a symbol of their freedom from royal encroachments. At the center of Becket's cult were the miracle stories and healing powers of the shrine and images associated with Thomas, not political ideologies. At the time of the Reformation, Becket's cult in England was actually waning in popularity as more current saints and tales of their martyrdom attracted pilgrims. But to Henry VIII, Becket's very name could create possible opposition to royal tyranny and stimulate popular reaction against Henry's acts of sacrilege. With this threat in mind, much effort was devoted to vilifying him. Throughout the later 1530s, the suppression of the worship of St. Thomas became the focus of Henry's anti-papal campaign. Becket
needed "exorcising" from the consciousness of the people who for centuries had treated him as the national saint 46

The first signals of the end of Becket’s cult were heard in 1536. The government abolished certain feast days, including the July 7th commemoration of Becket’s translation to the shrine, and in 1537 Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, did not perform the traditional fast on the eve of the July celebration. In addition, Cranmer urged that Thomas’s image should be removed from the city seal of Canterbury.

Cranmer had little to do with the assault on shrines, relics, and images, but he did refuse to condone masses for the dead, prayers to the saints, and pilgrimages. His destructive urge was essentially confined to the demolition of Becket’s shrine at Canterbury. On August 18, 1538, he suggested to Cromwell a thorough investigation of Becket’s shrine, starting what would be a savage attack on Canterbury’s riches associated with St. Thomas.

Cromwell openly criticized the worship of saints, especially St. Thomas Becket. In 1536, Cromwell introduced the “Ten Articles,” which defined the doctrinal position of Henry’s new Church including some specific references to the worship of saints in England. A number of the articles seem to have been derived directly from the “Twelve Conclusion of the Lollards”—most importantly article seven, which claimed that prayers to the saints should be null and void. 47 That same year, Cromwell issued the “First Royal Injunctions of Henry VIII,” which re-emphasized Henry’s policy toward idols and superstitions. Realizing the critical humanist attitude toward the shrine and images of
Saint Thomas, it may have been Cromwell who had Erasmus’s *A Pilgrimage for Religion’s Sake* reprinted in 1536. 

By 1538 with the Dissolution of the Monasteries nearly complete, the devastation of the shrines was at hand. In late September, “The Second Injunctions of Henry VIII” were drawn up by Cromwell. When the Injunctions were issued in print, items had been added to the end that represented a fresh attack on devotion to the saints, and specifically on the feasts of St. Thomas Becket.

15. *Item,* . . . excepted also the commemoration of Thomas Becket, sometime Archbishop of Canterbury which shall be clean omitted, and instead thereof the ferual service be used.

The added clause of the Injunctions had an urgent practical relevance for it gave backing to the destruction of Becket’s shrine, his relics and his imagery. Later that year, the culmination of antagonism toward Becket would occur in the “Proclamation of November 1538” issued on the sixteenth of that month.

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4 Guy, 25.


Russell, 86.

Aston, 97.

Howard, 23.

Finucane, 210-11.

Guy, 26, and Russell, 87.


Phillips, 34.

Phillips, 30.

Howard, 23.

Phillips, 35.

Guy, 118.


Aston, 197.

Howard, 26.

Phillips, 36 and Aston, 196.

Phillips, 38.

Phillips, 40.

Phillips, 37.

Guy, 20-22.

Guy, 116.
27 Guy, 117.


29 Guy, 128-9.

30 Hutchinson, 1.

31 Guy, 180.


33 Guy, 135.

34 Guy, 136-7.

35 Guy, 27.

36 Guyl44.


38 Beckingsale, 67.


40 Dickens, 94-5.

41 Beckingsale, 43.

42 Guy, 148.

43 Hutchinson, 69.

44 Phillips, 63.

46 Elton, 277.


48 Aston, 198.

49 MacCulloch, 237.

50 Douglas and Williams, 814.
CHAPTER IV

THE DESTRUCTION OF IMAGERY

This chapter will elaborate on the acts discussed in chapter three that were precursors to Reformation iconoclasm and will consider the relevance of other important acts leading to the destruction of imagery in sixteenth-century England. After discussing the general nature of iconoclasm in England, the chapter will proceed to examine St. Thomas Becket imagery, why it was specifically destroyed, how the Henrician regime discredited Becket personally, the actual acts of destruction, and the reactions of sixteenth-century society. In conclusion, the chapter will analyze the reactions to and results of iconoclasm under Henry in general and the effects on the status of English art and the pilgrimages to Canterbury.

What mattered most to Henry VIII’s new regime was adherence to the new doctrine of royal supremacy. As previously mentioned, it was Cromwell who pushed Henry along in his reformist actions. Toward the visual arts, Cromwell showed a puritan suspicion, believing that truth is only revealed in Scripture and without the use of imagery. Cromwell assisted Henry with the break with the papacy, but this goal was to forward his own evangelical cause. His was a reformer who attacked the forms of the old religion. By the early summer of 1535, Cromwell was supporting open criticism of traditional Catholic devotional practices and their underlying doctrines, including the veneration of religious imagery.
Along with the royal Supremacy, Cromwell helped initiate the official acts that commented on the correct use of images. Asserting that England was an independent empire and that the realm had been committed to him by God, Henry claimed the right to do whatever he pleased, not only with the monasteries, but with shrines and religious imagery as well. Cromwell was well aware of and indeed partly responsible for Henry's new position. He influenced Henry heavily, planning to reform the use of religious imagery in order to rid England of all Catholic traces.

In September 1535, Cromwell received complaints from traditional Catholic factions that a book had been printed that condoned the "removal" of images. This book was a translation of Bucer's *Das Einigerlei Bild*, a 1530 Reformation treatise written to justify the destruction of all images in Strasbourg. This was beyond the designs of Henry's reform ideas, but not beyond the objectives of Cromwell, who did nothing to suppress the tract that ran a second and more radical edition the following year.

Cromwell was already supporting radical preachers in stirring up controversy concerning traditional mass services and the use of imagery in the churches. Hugh Latimer, who had been preaching against the veneration of images since 1532, was recruited by Cromwell as a Reformation publicist to fight against the persistence of traditional piety. Together they asserted that traditional devotion was disloyal to the crown and loyal to the papacy.

On June 9, 1536, Latimer opened proceedings in which Parliament and Convocation were assembled with a sermon that enraged the clergy. He denounced the main features of popular devotion including the cult of saints, images, votive lights at
shrines and before images, relics, holy days and pilgrimages. He argued that there had been many unsuccessful attempts to trim such abuses in the past and that there remained no remedy but abolition. The clerical assembly retaliated with a rejection of Latimer’s reform program, defending the veneration of images and relics. What followed two weeks later was the “Ten Articles,” a document drawn up by Thomas Cromwell and signed by the clergy limiting acceptance of church imagery.\(^8\)

The Articles’ purpose was “to establish Christian quietness and unity . . . and to avoid contentious opinions.”\(^9\) To be sure, they represented something of a compromise between old and new opinions. The Articles approved of the veneration of saints and images but carefully qualified their usage. Images were here regarded as “representers of virtue and good example” and were meant to be the “kindlers and fires of men’s minds,” but preachers were to warn the laity against idolatry.\(^10\) The laity were to be instructed that worship was in reality not offered to the images or to the saints, but only to God. In this way, saints were denied the ability to quell specific needs or bestow benefits to the worshipper.\(^11\) The stress that was laid on teaching and preaching as an essential part to the reform of abuses and the call to protection against idolatry clearly marked the “insertion of the reforming wedge.”\(^12\)

In August of 1536, the “Ten Articles” were surpassed by the first set of Injunctions. Contemporary with the beginnings of the Dissolution of Monasteries, the Injunctions were a list of demands which insisted on clerical obedience and signified the regime’s, especially Cromwell’s, growing hostility toward the cult of saints. The Injunctions surpassed the “Ten Articles” by overtly condemning the worship of images or
relics for superstitious purposes. Of the positive value of images which had been listed in the "Ten Articles," the Injunctions said nothing. Although this represented a large step in the direction of the Reformation of the English Church and its imagery, it was unlikely that radical reformers like Latimer, Cromwell, and Cranmer would remain satisfied with such half-measures. They did not have to wait long.

The Bishops' Book of 1537, an expansion of the "Ten Articles" to be used for instruction in preaching, presented an even more radical view of the use of images arguing that their uses in churches added to the dullness of men's wits and were surviving traces of paganism. It was at this point that the demarcation between Henry's ideas of Reformation and those of Cromwell became apparent. Henry felt that the tone of the new rules was too drastic, while Cromwell felt that it was not harsh enough. Henry was not radically opposed to the veneration of images, as long as the prayers were directed properly toward God. Cromwell felt that images deserved no honor whatsoever. But the actual breach between Henry and Cromwell was not to come until after the set of Injunctions.

Before the issue of the "Second Injunctions of Henry VIII" in 1538, the whole country had become aware of the threat of iconoclasm. England had borne witness to the Dissolution of the Monasteries accompanied by the suppression of cult images. The second set of Injunctions issued in September 1538 was harsher still to the cults and it scandalized traditionalists. They were put forth not to moderate, but to dismiss not only pilgrimages, but every manifestation of the cult of saints. In comparison with the first Injunctions which still allowed for "non-superstitious" devotion, images were granted no value and any devotion to them was now idolatry, detestable and abhorrent to God.
Pertinent here, the seventh Injunction commanded that images were to be taken down and “delayed.”

The second Injunctions marked an advance in the reformed cause of England, but a proclamation issued in November 1538 by Henry himself represents his evolving, or more precisely “re-evolving” traditionalist attitude in which he rejected much of the reforming onslaught that Cromwell had initiated against the customs of traditional religion in England. The Proclamation was a setback for Cromwell and his fellow reformers. However, Cromwell still remained powerful in the council and was able and trusted to make alterations on legal documents. As a result, in its final form the Proclamation had two additional clauses not found in the first draft that had been drawn up by Henry. Under the heavy influence of Cromwell’s hand, the second of these was an attack on the memory and cult of Thomas Becket whose shrine had been torn down early in September. The disparity between the body of text—those parts intended to counter the dangers of the Reformation and those parts against idolatry—reflect the growing split between the policies of the king and Cromwell and led, in 1540, to Cromwell’s fall and execution when he would be labeled as a “detestable heretic” who misled the king’s subjects into a refusal of the true faith.

When the shrines of Becket and other saints were dismantled, images were more often than not ruthlessly destroyed as part of the act. Items that could not enrich the king’s treasury were simply smashed or burned. In general, image breaking in England cannot be separated from that which took place on the continent. However, iconoclasm in England did stand somewhat apart. Image breaking in England moved much more
slowly than in other countries, taking decades to achieve what was reached in other places in a very short time. Furthermore, iconoclasm in England always remained subject to government control. Iconoclasm can result from many things: profiteering, political associations, religious reform, or impulse. 

But whereas in other countries iconoclasm was a declaratory symbol of religious change, in England it was grasped as a propagandist tool by officials to instill the Henrician regime.

Perhaps the abused images of sixteenth-century England could have been dealt with without destroying them and without radical doctrinal change, but centuries of popular devotion made it hard to separate valid teaching images from improperly worshipped ones.

A description of saints and their iconography will help put the centuries of popular religion that Henry VIII and Cromwell were against in suitable context. Such an outline will also provide a basis for our understanding of what the worshipper saw in images like those of St. Thomas Becket.

In the two generations before the rule of Henry VIII, the parish churches of England saw an incredible amount of devotion and wealth go into building and ornamentation—especially the making of new images and the embellishing of old ones. Artworks like wall paintings predominantly portrayed narrative iconography from the life of Christ and the saints. In addition to these, saints’ images filled the churches in sculpture, stained glass, and painted images as seen on the panels of rood-screens—the wooden screens which filled the arch and marked the separation between chancel and nave. In a sense, the hierarchical placement of holy images provided visual and doctrinal
The medieval rood-screen was a “complex icon of heavenly hierarchy” in which apostles, prophets, angels and saints were arranged below the cross.\textsuperscript{25} Understanding the relational positions of saints to each other was simplified for the illiterate by visual example. The medieval worshipper had the sense of being surrounded and assisted by the whole company of heaven.

A cathedral like Canterbury could be the host of the images of numerous saints, some with their own chapels and altars. Saints were not seen primarily as exemplars, but rather as powerful helpers and healers in times of need. They were the dispensers of miracles and their cults were founded on the hope of rescue from the threats of poverty, disease and the misfortunes of social class. Illustrated scenes with grave subject matter such as the passion, the seven deadly sins, or the dance of death show us that sixteenth-century European society was under heavy moralistic strains. Devotion to the saints presented an appeal by the laity to a group of loving friends who would not be too hard on weak mortal men. With this in mind, saints portrayed on a rood screen could create a sense of “fellow feeling” or Christian communion to a parish that saw their “heavenly neighbors” gazing back at them.\textsuperscript{26}

For us, the sequence and frequency of saints in imagery reveals quite a bit about popular medieval devotional preferences. Becket, being one of the most frequently portrayed saints in England, certainly must have caught the attention of Henry VIII’s and Cromwell’s reforming party, for certain screens with images of the martyr were savagely defaced (fig. 8). Insecurity about the total supremacy of his rule had led Henry VIII to suspect that this sort of popular devotion might be a catalyst for criticism and resistance to
the political status quo. Henry was retreating from the radical destruction of images, but considering the case of St. Thomas Becket, Henry could make an exception.

The destruction of relics began in an erratic fashion. By 1535 Cromwell’s commissioners were already removing them from the soon-to-be dissolved monastic houses. Iconoclasm reached its peak in 1538, the year of the “Second Injunctions of Henry VIII.” Images of English saints were smashed on the spot or taken to London to be denounced publicly, then either destroyed or added to the royal treasury. In order to show the people that images such as the statues of the Virgin or of Christ were human devices unworthy of veneration, they were taken to public places and burned to ashes. They were thus proven to be natural materials crafted by men and quite void of supernatural qualities.

The events of 1538, mainly the destruction of the shrines, marked a decisive advance for the iconoclasts. By removing the religious orders’ material means of existence, Cromwell had effectively rubbed them out. Countless images that had been sources of supposed miraculous occurrences were exposed by Cromwell, publicly disgraced and destroyed. Most outstanding of all was the destruction of the shrine of St. Thomas which lasted an entire week, September 3 or 4 through 11 of 1538. Indeed, by 1539 Cromwell and his allies had covered an impressive amount of ground from the beginning of the Dissolution in 1536. How this may have affected sixteenth-century English society will be discussed further below.

The previous chapter discussed trends in Becket criticism up to the time of Henry VIII, who officially established the notion that Thomas embodied the triumph of the
immunities and privileges of the Church over the king’s law. Henry was most likely afraid that continued existence of Becket’s fame would bring opposition and possible rebellion to his supreme kingship. With the help of Cromwell, Henry decided that Becket needed to be disgraced in front of his worshippers. By the late 1530s, Becket had become the focus of Henry’s campaign against the papacy. As previously mentioned, in September 1538 Cromwell drew up the second set of Injunctions, which attacked the devotions to all saints but specifically those to St. Thomas Becket. Furthermore, the 1538 Proclamation in November in the tradition of the Lollards before him, the king claimed that Becket was both rebel and traitor to Henry II, that he was no martyr, and that he had been a champion to maintain the pope’s usurped authority. Perhaps these allegations would shock unsuspecting pilgrims and Becket worshippers who were mostly consumed with Thomas’s superficial miraculous qualities and abilities, into rejecting him as a martyr.

Studying the destruction of Becket imagery during the Reformation provides an excellent example of how government policy was carried out through exaggeration and falsification. For Henry VIII, the attack on Becket was done to justify Protestant negation of the papacy. He was trying to instill nationalism in a country by degrading a figurehead who had been formerly linked with papal power over royal. But his task was not easy, for Becket himself had served to instill a sense of English nationalism in the country. His pan-European fame which had brought thousands of foreign travelers to Canterbury had filled the English people with pride and a sense of worldly importance. Ironically, both Cromwell and Cranmer owed their baptismal names to Becket’s popularity. But Henry VIII, assisted by Cromwell, insisted that Becket had been an
annoyance to Henry II and claimed that as a martyr he had been misleading the pilgrims into idolatry for centuries. So in essence, Becket was Henry VIII's perfect scapegoat. Henry had to shed a positive light on his break with the papacy, so he focused on Becket as a villain linked with the pope who had tried to bring his king to ruin. Anyone who worshipped Becket was still linked with the pope and would therefore be trying to bring Henry to ruin. He hoped that portraying Becket in such a negative way would quell the upheaval that his subjects had experienced since his break with the papacy and his call to iconoclasm.

In order to promulgate a negative view of Becket, the Henrician regime passed acts against Becket, spoiling his name. In August 1538, while numerous shrines were being pulled down, Cranmer suggested that Cromwell investigate the shrine of St. Thomas. The spoliation of the shrine at Canterbury in September was the first officially led destruction of objects created in veneration of St. Thomas and was actually attended by Henry. Over four hundred items were pulled down and smashed causing the destruction at Canterbury to be the most spectacular piece of iconoclasm in the English Church to date. But even as the devastation of the shrine at Canterbury was being completed, Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell were devising a continued campaign to discredit publicly Becket.

It is true that the two final clauses in the Proclamation of November 1538 had been added, most likely by Cromwell, to Henry's first draft. In general, the Proclamation was a reversal from the radical direction of the Reformation to a more conservative one. But
these two additional clauses represent an almost desperate grasp by radical factions to hold on to their reforming glory.

The first of the two clauses had returned to the tone of the "Ten Articles" by way of suggesting that images should not be worshipped in a superstitious manner. From the harsh manner of the second Injunctions in which Injunction seven had stated that images were to be taken down, it is obvious that Cromwell and his group had lost ground in their radical reforming cause. The final clause was an attack on Thomas Becket, who was denounced as a maintainer of the enormities of the Bishop of Rome:

His images and pictures throughout the whole realm should be put down and avoided out of all churches, chapels and other places, and that from hence forth, the days [of] festival in his name shall not be observed, nor the service, office, antiphons, collettes, and prayers in his name read but razed and out of all the books . . . to the intent that his grace's loving subjects shall be no longer led to commit idolatry, as they have done in times passed, upon pain of his majesty's indignation, and imprisonment at his grace's pleasure.34

Perhaps this was an attempt by Cromwell to gain the ground he was losing as Henry began to turn back to a more traditional view of the uses of religious imagery. Henry was very much in favor of terminating the worship of Becket in England. Sensing Henry's fervent dislike of the saint, Cromwell took advantage of Henry's negative feelings toward Becket for his own cause. In essence, the destruction of Becket imagery may have evolved as the result of a clandestine attempt by Cromwell to "re-radicalize" Henry's growing conservatism.

If this is true, then Henry had only wanted to relieve Becket of his sainthood and prevent the worship by his subjects of images which still had traces of popery. Perhaps it
was only Cromwell who had actually wanted to destroy the imagery in order to further his own cause.

There can be little doubt that Henry's attack on Becket aided his larger assault on popery in general. But the destruction of Becket's imagery most likely served as propaganda for the slowly dying radical reformist cause of Cromwell, Cranmer, and their group. There is no document to prove whether Henry was for or against the actual destruction of Becket imagery. It is clear that he was wholly committed to the reform of the cult of saints and of images, and he was opposed to unnecessary deviation from traditional teachings of the mass. The veneration of the image of Christ on the cross on Easter Sunday, for instance, was a traditional part of the liturgy; the pilgrimage to Canterbury to worship Becket was not. It also seems clear that the abuse of such a publicly famous figure as Becket served two purposes. Ridiculing Becket in turn ridiculed the pope and could satisfy both Henry's attempts to turn England against the pope and Cromwell's need to make reformist iconoclasm publicly acceptable.

The destruction of Becket paraphernalia had started two months before the November Proclamation of 1538. Cromwell and his commissioners were in Canterbury Cathedral in September, and within two weeks, the shrine had been dismantled, Thomas's bones buried elsewhere or burnt, and the treasures carted off to the royal coffers. In that same month, the second Injunctions abolished all liturgical celebrations in Thomas's honor. On November 16, the Proclamation with the added clauses re-fabricated Becket's story turning him into a rebel and a traitor, and ordered that his images should be taken down and his name erased from all the service books. Cromwell even followed up the
new laws in December by sending a letter to the bishops restating the call for an absolute end to Becket veneration. Because images of Becket had been worshipped and regarded as possessing sanctity in themselves, they were all to be destroyed.35

The results of the destruction can be seen in surviving medieval calendars—chronological lists of saints’ feast days—where Becket’s name is usually scratched out or barely legible. In some service books, whole pages were cut or mutilated in conformity of these mandates. A marginal illustration from the Luttrell Psalter (c.1325-35) exists today in which Becket’s image has been defaced by lines scored through his figure (fig 9). Seals of London which originally had Becket’s bust on them were replaced by the king’s coat of arms.36 The niches at Westminster cathedral or the Lollard Tower of Lambeth Palace which once held statues of St. Thomas still remain empty today.37 Destruction was quite easy when it was a question of stained glass. For example, St. Lucy’s chapel in the south transept of Christ Church Cathedral at Oxford, shows the head of St. Thomas to be missing, the glass having obviously been broken. At Canterbury, the Altar of the Sword Point, a simple wooden altar in the transept which was set up in 1172, was pulled down in 1538. Traces of the altar, which commemorated the exact spot where Richard Le Bret’s sword broke in two and fell to the floor after delivering the fatal blow to Thomas’s head, can still be made out today. And of course there are the rood-screens on which the figures of St. Thomas were scratched out with a particular vengeance, as can be seen in the remaining screen from Burlingham St. Andrew which had only been completed in the early 1530s (fig. 8).
In contrast to the complete dismantling of the shrine at Canterbury and the destruction of Becket images, some determined venerateds of St. Thomas would salvage what they could. Many country liturgical books would show the services for Thomas Becket only halfheartedly erased or crossed out with the faintest of diagonal pen strokes, making continued use of them perfectly possible. Many images were merely transformed to represent a new holy figure while still secretly depicting St. Thomas Becket. At Ashford after the November 1538 Proclamation against Becket came out, the parishioners had not destroyed his image in the church but instead had put a wool comb in his hand, thereby transposing Becket into St. Blaise. In Suffolk, the church of Earl Stonham transposed its martyrdom of Becket into the martyrdom of St. Catherine. To be sure, Cromwell did not crush every image in England overnight. Many images and relics were spared only to be brought on trial and destroyed by successive Tudor kings and their regimes.

Someone, possibly Cromwell, went to even greater extremes to discredit Becket by inventing a trial to which Becket had been supposedly cited to appear in April 1538. When he did not show, he was accused of treason, and judgment called for the destruction of his shrine. The trial, which has been attributed to Cromwell, served to justify the accusation of treason placed on Becket by the November 1538 Proclamation and to justify the desecration of his shrine.

The extent to which one of Christendom’s most famous saints was attacked created interest and criticism abroad. The news spread to Europe as quickly as had the report of Becket’s murder four hundred years earlier. Becket’s fate was both deeply
bemoaned and resented by those who were opposed to the new ecclesiastical policies and by those who regarded the Canterbury pilgrimage as a valuable endeavor. Indeed, Henry's actions and the realization that the pilgrimages to Canterbury would cease, provided European and papal opponents to Henry with potent arguments against his reforms.

What really horrified Europe was the rumor that Becket's bones had been burned. Whether they were actually relocated or burnt is still unresolved but their disappearance created quite an issue at the time between Henry and the Catholic factions remaining in Europe—mainly Pope Paul III (1468-1549), who threatened him with excommunication. The pope promulgated a bull of excommunication that specifically accused the king of having ordered the burning of St. Thomas's bones following a mock trial. The stories of both the trial and the burning of the saint's bones were integral parts of the pope's condemnation of Henry's actions and came to symbolize the European perception of Henry's Reformation as brutal and destructive. Indeed there are many recorded indignities from Catholic Europeans who were shocked to hear the rumor that the saint's bones may have been burned.

Both the burning of the bones and the rumored trial were vigorously denied by Henry and Cromwell. As the stories spread throughout the continent, the king's difficulties increased at home to a point that necessitated public explanation of his policy on his treatment of the shrines and relics in late 1538 or early 1539. The statement from late 1538 or early 1539 was entitled Official Account of the Reformation. Vindication of the Charges Recently Effected in England. The document was a sort of official reply to
English subjects to the charges of Rome which referred to the destruction of Thomas’s shrine specifically, reconstructing once again the history of Becket’s crimes against royal jurisdiction. The document also claims that his bones were not burned, but rather taken away to a random tower to be thrown in with the other bones of “de-canonized” saints. In the wake of discontent caused by the destruction of Thomas’s shrine, the king obviously felt that he had to defend his actions. But one thing remains certain, the king was determined that Becket’s relics would never be the focus of pilgrimage and veneration again.

Devotion to Becket continued after 1538 even though his shrine was gone and his cult outlawed. This may be a sign that the determined cult of St. Thomas strove ever onward, secretly rejecting the acts and proclamations meant to destroy them. Most likely, continuing devotion to St. Thomas was due to the confusing tone of the issued statutes that contradicted themselves by changing their nature from conservative to radical and back again. And of course, abolishing a tradition that was nearly four centuries old was no easy thing and could not be entirely accomplished in one half of a decade.

Successive Tudor rulers would push the radical programs of the Reformation forward and backward. In 1547 Edward VI, Henry VIII’s son, would promote iconoclasm and Becket’s name would be removed from any service books in which it remained. Image worship, whether superstitious or not, would be ruled out completely. But in 1553, Mary confused the issue by re-installing the Catholic clergy and restoring the old traditions. Finally, in 1558 Mary’s work was reversed by the accession of Elizabeth, and the Church would once again be stripped of its imagery. Indeed, most of the medieval
artifacts that had survived Henry’s reign were smashed once and for all during successive Tudor monarchies.

Toward the end of 1538 with the issuing of the Proclamation, it was obvious that two camps had formed inside the Henrician regime: that of Henry and his growing conservatism and that of Cromwell and his desperate attempts to continue radical iconoclastic reform policies. As a result, the divisions of opinion concerning the ruling on imagery from 1538 proved to be hopelessly ambiguous. These conflicting signals must have presented a confusing world to the laity whose traditions of worship were merely revised at one moment and completely condemned at the next. The intensity and scope of the Henrician assault on imagery would vary greatly from region to region with traditionalist clergy in one place, and radical reformers in the next.

By 1538, the disruption in the status quo was growing due to the confusing attempts to remove some images, while retaining others on the basis of a distinction between false worship and proper use. The distinctions were puzzling and unrealizable. It was nearly impossible to discern which images were being used properly and which images were the objects of idolatry. However, the new royal policies created less excitement and comment than might be expected. After all, resistance to any of King Henry’s policies was a highly dangerous thing.

A draft proclamation “for uniformity in religion” in April 1539 proved that Henry blamed the radical reformers for much of the religious confusion and separation that England was experiencing. The reform movement had been discredited by the radical pulpit manner of the more fanatical reformers and by rash acts of iconoclasm which
shocked those to whom traditional piety was still dear. The passing of the "Act of Six Articles" of 1539 in June represented another victory for traditional piety. It also marked the beginning of the end for Cromwell and dislodged from office some of the key figures behind the radical onslaught on traditional piety.

In 1541 steps were taken to assure that the September 1538 Injunctions about the proper use of images were being enforced, and in 1543 the Bishops' Book was revised and called the King's Book. It contained a rewriting of the second commandment that unmistakably toned down the prohibition of images:

1543: Thou shalt not have any graven image, nor any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth, to the intent to do godly honour and worship unto them. The original stated:

1537: Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven thing, nor any similitude of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them.

Obviously, the conservatives who revised the second commandment in 1543 were far less severe in condemning the use of religious images. But even considering Henry's return to more conservative reform tactics in the end, he himself had not stopped short of destroying and burning images, the most marked example being those of Thomas Becket.

Henry, supported by Cromwell, had originally promoted the idea that the general attack on traditional religion, monasteries, shrines and images would gain monastic wealth that could be put to better use for the commonwealth. Along with the loss of culture and
learning, was the destruction of much true beauty. Monastic architecture was one of the artistic glories of medieval England, and it is unnerving to see how quickly buildings fell into ruins as they were looted and used as quarries for the building of newer houses. Most all of the majesty vanished—gothic choirs, stained glass, sculpture, and fine examples of jeweler's and goldsmith's trades. The dissolution likewise involved the destruction of many libraries by deliberate attacks on "popish" books of devotion, theology and law. There is no knowing how much was actually lost, but one can only guess at the eradication of a tremendous amount of fine manuscripts and their illuminations that would have been invaluable for study today.

The heyday of pilgrimage to the shrine at Canterbury was over by the fifteenth century. By the eve of the Reformation there was evidence of neglect of the traditional shrines like those of St. Hugh at Lincoln, St. Cuthbert as Durham, or Becket at Canterbury. But this is not a reflection of the waning of the belief in saints, but rather a movement by the pilgrims to more recently established saints and their healing shrines. The more current saints and the stories of their martyrdoms were surpassing the tales of old, occasioning new miracles, and attracting pilgrims elsewhere.

The primary purpose of the pilgrimage had been to seek the holy, solidly embodied in a sacred shrine, relic, or image. However, Reformation belief dictated that the holy could not be localized in such a fashion. Pilgrimage had provided a temporary release from the constrictions and norms of ordinary living. At best, pilgrimage was a ritual, symbolic enactment—the consecration of one's whole life, a journey toward the sacred. At worst the pilgrims were travelers on holiday seeking only self gain and material reward.
as in *The Canterbury Tales*. But more in keeping with reality, it was a stream of desperate men and women who flocked to the healing shrines, their hardships being of the essence.\(^6\)

When Cromwell attacked the monasteries, he was striking out at institutions with a central place in popular religious practice. Although the superstition at the shrines was deeply woven into the fabric of popular religion, Cromwell dismissed centuries of tradition as nothing more than large scale exploitation of simple believers.\(^6\) Both he and Henry knew how to reach the common man. The laity would not be offended so much by any doctrine about the supremacy or denial of Becket's sainthood or papal authority, but the spoliation of the shrine and images of Becket in their parish churches would make a stark statement and drive the new reform home. These things touched the common worshipper at a tender spot.\(^6\) However, the outrage that many Catholic traditionalists felt at the destruction of the shrines and the iconoclasm wrought upon their images of saints was effectively muted by the intelligent moves of Cromwell. Statutes such as the Treasons Act outlawed any complaints against the king's proceedings. In a time of cruel punishment and executions, dissent seldom lasted long enough to become a public sensation.

Henry VIII, with the help of Cromwell, erased Becket from English sight physically. In later Tudor times, Becket's biography would be revised in history writing and he would be shown as a traitor in order to justify Henry VIII's actions. But it was Henry who had initially promoted the negative view of Becket and his papal affiliations to verify his total break with the papacy. He influenced his people by destroying the artworks depicting Becket not merely by hiding them from view, but by maliciously destroying the images under the public eye.


4 Duffy, 381.


6 Duffy, 386.

7 Duffy, 379.

8 Aston, 223.


10 Duffy, 391.

11 Duffy, 392.

12 Aston, 223.

13 Aston, 225.

14 Duffy, 400-401.

15 Aston, 225.

16 The word “delay” presents an ambiguity as to whether the images were actually destroyed or just taken down. Aston believes that it is precisely this ambiguity of wording that image-breaking contemporaries took advantage of naturally reading is as ordering destruction. Aston, 227.

17 Duffy, 411, 400-401.

18 Aston, 237.
Some of these statues such as a crucifix from Boxley called the “Rood of Grace” were actually mechanized by secret engines and pulleys inside that when operated by the monks would appear to animate the statue. All were seen as miraculous happenings by naive and simple townspeople. See Finucane, 207-210.
37 Borenius, 22 and 24.

38 Duffy, 418.

39 Guy, 179.

40 Finucane, 211.

41 However, Butler posits that the trial may not have been a contemporary document and therefore not devised by Cromwell. Butler, 119.

42 Finucane, 212.

43 Butler, 127.

44 Butler, 119.


46 Refer to Butler, 119-123.

47 Butler, 59.

48 Butler, 127.

49 Finucane, 212.

50 Hutchinson, 97.

51 Finucane, 213.

52 Aston, 228.

53 Aston, 228.

54 Hutchinson, 72.

55 Hutchinson, 78.

56 Aston, 238-40.
57 Aston, 255.


59 Duffy, 191.

60 Duffy, 195.

61 Duffy, 199.

62 Duffy, 385.

63 Hutchinson, 75.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This thesis studied a strain of the English Reformation's attack on imagery in order to understand the importance of St. Thomas Becket in art. In doing so, it also considered the veneration of images during the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance.

Primarily, this thesis was concerned with what seems to have been a special hostility towards St. Thomas. Throughout the later 1530s, the suppression of the worship of St. Thomas became the focus of Henry VIII's anti-papal campaign. In Henry's eyes, Becket stood for the ecclesiastical theory and canon laws against which he himself had rebelled. In the first place, Becket imagery stood as a reminder that the English people were paying homage to a former archbishop who had successfully and ostentatiously usurped the court's right to secular law over canon law. Henry, assisted by Thomas Cromwell, was quick to realize that the public degradation of Becket could be used as a device to calm the turbulence that the break with the papacy had caused to his subjects and to his ego. Indeed, Henry attacked Becket in order to justify the Protestant negation of the papacy.

Secondly, not only was Becket a champion of canon law, but his challenge to the authority of Henry II and the fact that he was the greatest of the English martyrs insured that his imagery would be pursued with special malevolence. Henry saw that the
prolonging the attachment to the laws and religion of old. With the help of Cromwell, Henry disgraced Becket in front of his subjects by effacing the artwork representing despised ideas and institutions. Together they debased Becket’s person and wiped out evidence of him as a religious figurehead.

Third, the flames of the grudge against Becket were fanned by Henry’s own insecurities about his total supremacy. He suspected that popular devotion to the martyred saint might be a catalyst for criticism and resistance to the political status quo. Henry discounted the fact that the cult was mostly drawn by the legend of the miracles and that the draw to venerate St. Thomas was not a political one. In his eyes, those who worshipped St. Thomas Becket threatened possible rebellion against the split with the papacy. Becket’s very name could create possible opposition to royal tyranny and stimulate popular reaction against Henry’s acts of sacrilege.

At the time of the November Proclamation of 1538, two camps had formed inside the Henrician regime: that of Henry and his growing conservatism and that of Cromwell and his desperate attempts to continue radical iconoclastic reform policies. Indeed, Henry was retreating from the radical destruction of images, but he made an exception with St. Thomas Becket and signed the Proclamation, the last clause of which declared that Becket’s images should be pulled down and removed from sight. However, there is no document to prove whether Henry was for or against the actual destruction of that imagery. It is clear that Henry was wholly committed to the reform of the cult of saints and images. In the particular case of Becket, Henry sought to relieve Becket of his sainthood so that his subjects would no longer be venerating images with traces of popery.
Of course Cromwell was the guiding force behind Henry's policies during the Reformation. Cromwell influenced Henry heavily, but for his own cause which was quite different from that of the king's. The conservative tone of the Proclamation of 1538 was a setback for Cromwell and his fellow reformers, but the second of the two additional clauses added was an attack on the memory and cult of Thomas Becket. Still possessing some influence with the king, Cromwell used and promoted Henry's negative feelings toward Becket for his own objectives. In essence, the fierce destruction of Becket imagery may have evolved as the result of a clandestine attempt by Cromwell to "re-radicalize" Henry's growing conservatism. Although Henry wanted Becket's sainthood taken away and his images removed from sight, the actual destruction most likely served as propaganda for the slowly dying radical reformist cause led by Cromwell.

In general, the English Reformation physically destroyed centuries of established institutions in towns and throughout the countryside. The loss of culture from destroyed artworks and architectural dilapidation left an enormous gap in the survival of artistic endeavors from the Middle Ages.

The radical reformers quest to destroy religious imagery promoted religious confusion and separation as can be seen in the example of the final clause of the November 1538 Proclamation—a call to destruction which stood apart from the more conservative main body of the text. These conflicting signals must have presented a confusing world to the laity whose traditions of worship were merely revised at one moment and denounced in the next. Moreover, the radical pulpit manner of the more fanatical reformers and rash acts of iconoclasm bewildered those who still cherished traditional piety.
The consequences of the destruction of Becket imagery by the Henrician regime exposed how iconoclasm not only destroyed religious art physically but debilitated it ideologically. Ideologically, in consideration of iconoclasm's effects on the laity, the call to destroy Becket imagery was a propaganda device for asserting the king's politics and will through the common man's dependence on images. Henry realized that having power over the laity necessitated erasing the things that they understood best and to which they clung most strongly. These included the images that idealized Saint Thomas Becket. Consequentially, this same psychology used in the ruination of Becket imagery fueled Cromwell's plan to re-radicalize the Reformation. Destroying imagery was one thing, but violently defacing and smashing images under the public eye was another matter—one done in order to create a sensation. Destruction in this way served to instill a new belief system based on the rejection of the old religion. To rule England apart from the papacy successfully, there could not be the kind of inner dissension that the continued veneration of images prolonged.

Destruction as propaganda was a popular tool throughout this period of the English Reformation. Cromwell destroyed the monasteries, exposing to the laity an overpowering church that was challenging the authority of the king and abusing the rights of the laity. Likewise, the Proclamation of 1538 claimed that Becket was both rebel and traitor to Henry II, that he was no martyr, that he had been leading people into idolatry for centuries, and that he had maintained the pope's usurped authority. Just as they were led to renounce the monasteries through the destruction of shrines and imagery, pilgrims and Becket worshippers were led by these same shocks into denying Becket's status as a
martyr. The laity would not be offended so much by any denial of Becket’s sainthood, but the devastation of the shrine and images of Becket in their parish churches would drive the new reform home.

Shedding light on different values for nearly four centuries, this specific study on the iconoclasm concerning Becket imagery provided insight into the ways in which the English religious image could carry multifaceted, ideological significance that represented diversified ideas for varying social strata—royal, ecclesiastical and lay. For Henry VIII, images depicting St. Thomas represented a rebellious archbishop who still posed a threat to his supreme well being. For Cromwell, the act of destroying Becket imagery was an opportunity to reassert a more radical and Protestant twist on the Reformation. To the clergy, Becket imagery had initially been a symbol of the perseverance of the Church’s authority, but later became a lucrative gimmick to attract the pilgrims to Canterbury. To the common man, Becket imagery represented the martyr with superhuman and miraculous healing powers. Whether St. Thomas Becket merited these glories and suspicions is not of the essence. What is of consequence here are the objects of the aftermath of his life—the images—and their significance in the early period of English Reformation iconoclasm.
ILLUSTRATIONS
Figure 6c
Figure 7a

Figure 7b
Si surgat adversus me Rex: na. non interfici tursum.
REFERENCES


