The Customary of the Shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral

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Add. MS 59616, is over nine thousand words long and full of unique information about the shrine and the cathedral. It offers an unparalleled window into the management and daily routine at one of Europe’s premier medieval cult centres, one of its most important monasteries, and one of its most important cathedrals. For modern scholars wishing to understand the nature and experience of pilgrimage, the use of church space, or the daily monastic life at England’s mother church, an understanding of how all these functions interacted with and affected each other must be the key to creating an accurate picture of the medieval experience in Canterbury Cathedral. The “Customary of the Shrine of St. Thomas,” as it is known, helps us to form such a holistic understanding as a snapshot of activities which took place around a major shrine in the early fifteenth century.

The Manuscript

Although the authors, the monastic shrine-keepers John Vyel and Edmund Kyngston, referred to their text as a “processus,” historians have settled on the name of the “Customary of the Shrine” and this current edition follows that designation. It is a document of eleven folios measuring 35.5cm by 25cm (14 by 10 inches), with ruled margins of 5.5cm (2 inches) to the left, 4cm (1.5 inches) to the top, and 2.5cm (1 inch) to the right. There are around thirty-six lines of Latin text to each page, in one hand throughout, excepting occasional later corrections, in a neat Anglicana script of the first half of the fifteenth century. Blue ink is used for the initial capitals on the first and last pages, and red ink throughout for numerals, capitals, rubrics, and marginal headings. Decoration is limited to a tasselled manicule on fol. 4r pointing to the stipulation that the clerks should render all offerings to the shrine-keepers, and to a small face, possibly of a monk, drawn in the capital N of “Nunc” on fol. 5r. The document is now bound with two late-thirteenth century copies of French verse Lives of Thomas Becket by Beneit de St. Albans and Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence. These were probably also held at the shrine, as some of the binding material at the end of the volume is a damaged account of plate and vestments lent to Oxford colleges by the shrine-keepers in 1380.

Following purchase of the Customary by the British Library (hereafter BL) from the long-running sale of the Phillipps Collection in 1975, its contents were précised by D. H. Turner in a brief but largely accurate article in the Canterbury Cathedral Chronicle.

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7 A Life of Thomas Becket in Verse, ed. and trans. Ian Short (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2013); La Vie de Thomas Becket par Beneit, poème anglo-normand du XIIe siècle, ed. Börje Schlyter (Lund: Gleerup, 1941).

8 The British Library online catalogue http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=8363 (accessed February 2, 2021) suggests that a line in this particular MS of Guernes’ Life points to the document having been recited to pilgrims at the shrine. This is based on a line which is common to all of the copies of the Life, not only that bound with the Customary, and as such is no evidence of use.
annual periodical of the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral. Turner was only concerned with giving a taster of the contents, picking out the broad outlines of the shrine-keepers' duties and some of the more interesting passages, and passing over almost the entire ritual year to focus on the Customary's description of the Feast of the Translation as indicative of the level of detail provided for the rest. It was never his intention to provide a subsequent edition or fuller study, although he hoped that one would appear soon. Nonetheless for many subsequent historians interested in pilgrimage and shrine management his short article has provided the main point of access to the contents of the Customary.

The only edition of the Customary prior to this current work was produced in 1990 by Peter Rowe as a dissertation for the MA in Medieval Studies at Birkbeck College, University of London. This comprised a full transcription of the text, an abbreviated translation, and ten thousand word introduction. Despite efforts to work it up the dissertation was never published, although Peter Rowe has been generous in sharing his work with historians, including the editor of this edition. For this current edition, however, it was necessary to prepare an entirely new transcription from the original manuscript, forming the basis for a new and complete translation, supporting apparatus, and introductory analysis.

The Nature of the Customary

The authors of the Customary tell us much about the circumstances of its creation. They were monks of Christ Church Cathedral Priory, John Vyel and Edmund Kyngston, who were serving as the two shrine-keepers (feretrarii) in 1428. Both were monks of some seniority, Vyel having been professed in 1399 and Kyngston in 1401, indicating that both would have been in their mid-forties at the time they were writing. Little is known of Kyngston's career apart from his tenure as shrine-keeper. Vyel, on the other hand, went on to hold the important position of sacrist for around ten years, indicating that he had a talent for administration. Indeed, we may pinpoint the finalization of the Customary to the first half of 1428, as at one point it names Prior Wodnesbergh, who died February 28, 1428, in terms which indicate he was still alive, and John Vyel can be seen operating as sacrist from June 1428. The Customary may have been planned by Vyel to set down his accumulated knowledge in anticipation of his change of office. The office of the shrine-keepers was itself one of considerable importance, responsible for overseeing a substantial and highly variable budget, supervising and performing a complex annual sequence of liturgical activities peculiar to the Shrine Chapel, and acting in many ways as the "outward-facing" link between the devotional life of the monks and that of visiting