

THE BECKET BOSS IN THE LADY CHAPEL,  
CHESTER CATHEDRAL.

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WITH the exception of the Virgin and the Chief Apostles, the iconography of St. Thomas Becket is probably the most extensive, or perhaps it would be correct to say, was the most extensive. Henry VIII had a particular vendetta against Becket and ordered that "All images and pictures of the Archbishop through the whole realm should be put down and avoided (removed) out of all Churches, Chapels and other places and that his name be expunged from the Calendar of Saints and all breviaries."

So ruthlessly was this order carried out that few representations in any form of the Saint remain undamaged in this country.

In the Lady Chapel of Chester Cathedral there is a boss representing the Murder of the Archbishop, which evidently escaped the notice of Henry's Commissioners. That it should have escaped is little wonder, for it is in one of the darkest spots of the Cathedral. It is the western boss nearly over the Shrine of St. Werburgh.<sup>1</sup>

I know only of two other bosses in this country representing this subject. It is possible that there may be some others in out-of-the-way corners, for with regard to bosses "visibility is generally low." There is a very fine example in one of the nave vaults of Exeter Cathedral, the date of which is supposed to be between 1341

<sup>1</sup> It is very badly worn, which is curious, as the two bosses to the east of it are in a good state of preservation. It is possible that some attempt had been made to deface it, for the figures suggest chipping.

and 1346.<sup>1</sup> As a work of art it far surpasses our Chester one, but the Chester boss is at least nearly sixty years earlier in date.

In the North Alley of Norwich Cathedral there are six bosses dealing with the life of Becket, the central one representing the murder. The North Alley was completed in 1430, therefore these are considerably later in date than Chester or Exeter.

The Lady Chapel of Chester Cathedral was built between 1265 and 1290.<sup>2</sup> The style of the vaulting certainly suggests a period about the latter date. Of course it is possible that the carving of the boss may be later than the groining, but it is generally a safe surmise that the work on the boss is contemporary with the completion of the vaulting, and in this case there are several features of the workmanship, which is rather crude, which induce me to think that it is not later than the last-mentioned date.

The design is good, the grouping of the figures could hardly have been bettered within the limits of the space. This suggests to me that the design was copied from some other boss and executed by a local and not particularly clever craftsman.<sup>3</sup>

While our Chester boss is inferior in artistic qualities, it has the advantage, due, I think, to its earlier date, of being more free from some of the conventions and errors which soon crept into the iconography of St. Thomas Becket.

Dr. Oliver in his *History of Exeter Cathedral* suggests that the representation on the Becket boss was borrowed from the obverse of the seal of Stephen Langton. If our

<sup>1</sup> *The Bosses and Corbels of Exeter Cathedral*, E. K. Prideaux and G. R. Holtshafts (1910).

<sup>2</sup> *Chester Cathedral*, Frank Bennett (Chester, 1925).

<sup>3</sup> At some post-Reformation period the boss had been covered with white-wash and it was only rediscovered during the renovation of the Lady Chapel in 1857-8.

Chester example has been copied from a seal, I should say it was from that of Richard Grant, Archbishop of Canterbury 1229-31. Allowing for the difference in material, there are certainly several striking similarities.

Whether these bosses did owe their design to seals, is a question on which I am not qualified to express an opinion. We must remember that medieval art always tended to adopt certain conventions with regard to any subject and that therefore whatever the material employed—wood, stone, ivory, vellum or canvas—the delineation tended to be similar.

In nearly all medieval representations of this scene, whether on seals or frescoes, glass or sculpture, there are nearly always one or two errors, which are constantly repeated.

The first is that invariably Becket is represented as falling at the altar. As a matter of fact, at the spot where he fell there was no altar. The murder was committed in the north-west transept in front of the corner wall of the Chapel of St. Benedict, and the nearest altar to the scene was the one in that chapel. The mistake arose through a wooden altar being subsequently erected on the site. This altar remained there for many years. The idea that the murder was enacted at the altar appealed to the medieval mind as giving greater horror to the deed. While in early representations it is this small altar which is depicted, in the course of time we find that the scene has changed to the High Altar of the Cathedral, later artists thus giving to the murder the most sacrilegious setting possible.

Another mistake invariably made is that of depicting Grim as the Archbishop's cross-bearer. He was not. The cross-bearer was Henry of Auxerre, who had fled at the beginning of the fray.

Before examining the boss, permit me a few words regarding the persons concerned.

About Becket there is no need to say anything, for he is the central figure which can never be mistaken.

Edward Grim was a Saxon monk of Cambridge. He was, as I have said, almost always shown with the Archbishop's cross in his hands.

The four knights were :

Reginald Fitzurse, "Son of the Bear." He was the possessor of the Manor of Williton in Somersetshire ; he had also property in Northamptonshire and Leicestershire.

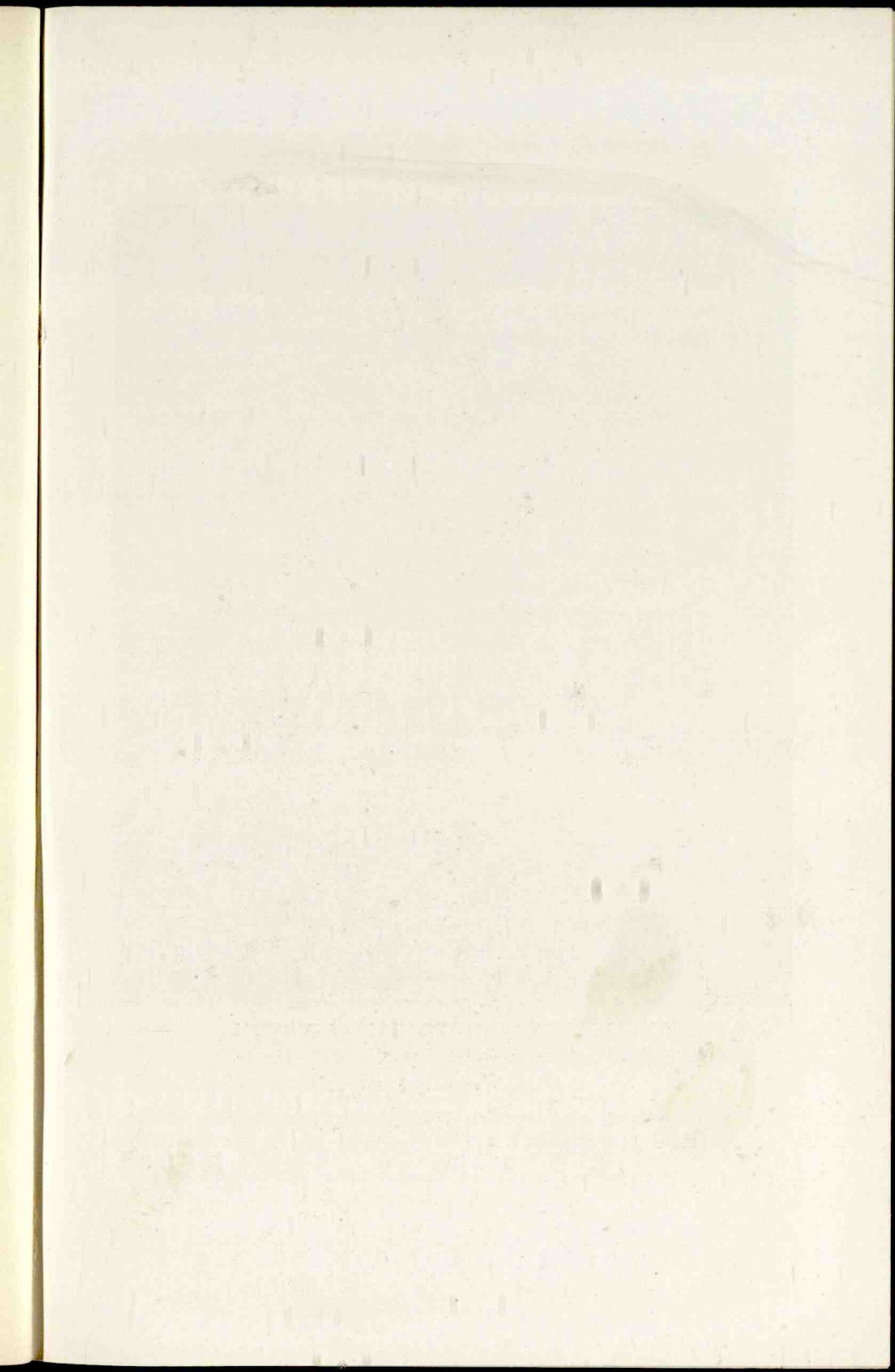
Hugh de Moreville. He was a Judge of Assize for the Counties of Northumberland and Cumberland, of which county he was also Forester and held the Barony of Burgh-on-the-Sands in the same county. The Castle of Knaresborough also belonged to him. De Moreville took no active part in the murder, being employed in holding back the crowds that surged towards the Cathedral on the news of what was happening spreading abroad.

William de Tracy was the younger son of John de Sudely and Grace de Traci. Probably he took the name of his mother because she was the daughter of William de Traci, a natural son of Henry I. He held large estates in Gloucestershire and Devonshire.

Richard the Breton, or, as he appears to have been generally called, Richard le Bret, was the son of Simon le Bret, who held considerable lands in Somersetshire. He is thought by some to have been a relation of Gilbert Foliot, Bishop of London, whom Becket had been instrumental in getting the Pope to excommunicate. If so, this would account for the animosity which he seems to have displayed towards the Archbishop.

In the light of this brief introduction let us examine the boss.

The figure of the Archbishop is on the extreme left, the hands are raised presumably in prayer. The sword of Le Bret appears to be embedded in the Primate's head. Behind Becket and further to the right stands Grim,





THE BECKET BOSS, CHESTER CATHEDRAL.

*By permission of the Authorities of the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington.*

holding the shaft of what undoubtedly is meant for the cross. With regard to the curious feature at the top of the shaft I shall have more to say presently. Now let us attempt to identify the knights. Hugh de Moreville, it will be remembered, did not take any active part in the murder, but kept back the crowds at the door, and in this boss he is not actively concerned in the murder, but is shown on the outer edge behind Becket. There can be no doubt about Le Bret. It was his sword that severed the top of Becket's head, the blow being struck with such force that the blade snapped on the pavement. It is noticeable that the blade is bent, which would be a typical medieval way of portraying this event. The figure on the right with his sword across Grim's arm is Sir William de Tracy. It was his blow, aimed at Becket, which Grim intercepted. The figure at the bottom of the boss waving his sword must be that of Sir Reginald Fitzurse.

One other feature calls for notice. In most cases Becket is shown as standing by an altar. I have already mentioned how this error arose. In our Chester boss, however, the designer has not placed an altar but what I believe is a credence table.<sup>1</sup> Probably the artist could not altogether divorce himself from the idea of the neighbourhood of an altar, but got a little nearer to truthfulness by substituting a table.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I am aware that some maintain that credence tables were not used in English churches until a later date. Several stone ones, however, exist. According to Neal's *History of the Puritans*, wooden credence tables were *reintroduced* in the reign of Elizabeth. In the Lincoln Cathedral Custom Book the celebrant, we are told "portabit calicem retro altare aliquo loco y doneo et decente." In the Sarum rubric we have the words "ministerium sive parva mensa, quae est a latere epistolae," which, I think, is fairly good evidence for the use of credence tables.

<sup>2</sup> Upon the table is a chalice covered with a veil, which certainly suggests an altar, though it might be so covered on a credence table. In our *Transactions*, N.S., Vol. 33, Dr. Philip Nelson gives an illustration of an alabaster panel in the British Museum, which represents the death of Becket before an altar on which is a similarly covered chalice as well as cruets.

Now I return to the curious floriated arrangement at the top of the staff which Grim is holding. The staff is evidently meant to be that of the Archbishop's cross, which is always erroneously put into the hands of Grim. A close examination proves that it is not the usual plain Latin cross.

In the sixth and seventh centuries, perhaps earlier, there arose a tendency to floralize the Cross of Christ—to portray it not as a dead thing but as a living symbol. So far was this idea carried that in some instances there is identification, at least symbolically, between the tree of the Crucifixion and the Tree of Life.

One of the most common kinds of vegetational cross was the palm-tree cross. I think that there can be little doubt that it is such a cross which Grim is holding. If my surmise is correct it gives an added interest to the boss, because it is a late example of such work. There are a fair number of processional crosses belonging to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, of which the trunk and cross-piece unmistakably represent palm-trunks, but there is no floriation at the top. These were soon followed by the usual type of the Middle Ages, the squared Latin cross.

In conclusion, let me say a word about medieval representations, whether stone or pictorial. There was never any attempt to observe the unities of time and place. All actions take place simultaneously. The object is to try to portray everything that has happened through the scene. Hence in our boss we have a recapitulation of the whole course of events. Fitzurse is waving his sword as he did at the beginning of the struggle, crying, "Strike! Strike!" de Tracy is striking at the Archbishop across Father Grim and has wounded his arm, while Le Bret is giving the final death stroke.

Thus, the worshipper had presented to his view a kind of kaleidoscopic picture of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket.