

Talk by Dr Michael Carter of English Heritage on 11 November 2021

Michael talked at first about four medieval monasteries he has worked on: two Benedictine abbeys - Whitby in Yorkshire and Battle in Sussex, and two Cistercian abbeys - Rievaulx in Yorkshire and Hailes in Gloucestershire. He focused on the relics for which abbeys such as these were famous, drawing in pilgrims from far and wide to touch the relics to be saved or healed, or imbued with some of the saint's sanctity. A piece of cloth from a saint's garment might be venerated as it had actually touched the saint's body. Michael pointed out that similar things happen today: for example a stained, cigarette-burned cardigan, unwashed for some 30 years and worn by Kurt Cobain, sold at auction in 2019 for \$334,000.

Relics brought considerable wealth to the monasteries, leading to a certain amount of swapping and replacing by what seems to us today unorthodox methods. Monks felt an urgency to acquire important, high-status relics to attract pilgrims and donors to their monasteries. As well as clothes already mentioned, bones, teeth, fingernails and fragments of Christ's cross and the Virgin's bed were much sought after, and important finds were housed in precious caskets of gold and silver inlaid with jewels; others were placed in small, engraved metal casings, inside wooden statues or other religious artefacts. Michael showed us one such tooth in an engraved metal case.



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He went on to talk about the murder of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral whose blood was collected in phials from the cathedral floor and tiny drops diluted with water were sold to pilgrims who flocked to buy it in specially made ampullae. The blood was miracle-working, people drank it and were cured of their ailments; equally miraculously, the blood in the Cathedral never ran out. Miracles were more prestigious and profitable than mere relics, so Becket's blood was bought by other churches and abbeys, making Canterbury one of the most popular sites of pilgrimage in the Christian world. A fragment of Becket's skull was 'taken' to Battle Abbey in 1175 when Odo, prior of Canterbury at the time of the murder, was elected as abbot of Battle. Relics from Becket were placed in an elaborate casket, decorated with scenes of his murder; other, similarly ornate caskets were made in the Middle Ages commemorating Becket's death and some of these still survive, notably at Hereford Cathedral and the Ashmolean; most, however, were lost at the Dissolution in the 1530s and 40s, melted down to be used to fund Henry VIII's appetite for high living, ostentatious display and foreign wars.

N.B. The block on which John the Baptist was beheaded was brought back from the Middle East by Richard I and donated to the church in Charing - apparently.

(A 13th-century manuscript illumination, the earliest known depiction of Thomas Becket's assassination in Canterbury Cathedral)