

HISTORICAL FIGURES AND CULT OF PLACE
CHRISTINA OF MARKYATE OF ST. ALBANS AND THOMAS BECKET OF CANTERBURY

Canterbury and St. Albans: Treasures from Church and Cloister

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At the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center



Reliquary Casket with Scenes from the Martyrdom of Saint Thomas Becket (detail), about 1173–1180. Silver, partial gilt, niello, garnet. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.190.520)
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The St. Albans Psalter and Ancestors of Christ windows at Canterbury are both linked to extraordinary historical figures: **Christina of Markyate**, a holy woman associated with Abbey of St. Albans, who likely owned the psalter, and **Saint Thomas Becket**, whose dramatic martyrdom transformed Canterbury Cathedral into a major pilgrimage site at the time the Ancestors of Christ windows were made.

Thomas Becket and Canterbury

Thomas Becket is the best known English saints. Although born in London in 1118, he will always be associated with Canterbury Cathedral. Becket was made an archdeacon of Canterbury in 1154, appointed chancellor to King Henry II the following year, and became the archbishop of Canterbury in 1162.

Soon after becoming the archbishop, Becket came into conflict with King Henry regarding the authority of the church versus that of the king. This conflict led to Becket living in exile in France for seven years before returning to Canterbury, where he was murdered on the orders of the king. The martyrdom of Becket in the cathedral on December 29, 1170 had a tremendous effect on the community. The archbishop was first buried in the crypt below the eastern end of the church.

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Becket was canonized as a saint in 1173. A year later a fire damaged the church, leading to the redesign of the eastern end of the cathedral to house a shrine for the saint's relics. That goal was spectacularly realized with the completion of that part of the building in 1184, and the installation of the Ancestors of Christ windows in the clerestory, finished by the shrine was dedicated in 1220. In the 12th century, the cult of Becket spread quickly. Pilgrims – peasants, laborers, merchants, nobles, and royalty – from throughout Europe flocked to his tomb in the crypt on quests for healing and the remission of sin. That tradition is most famously associated with in Geoffrey Chaucer's famous book *The Canterbury Tales* (1475) and Canterbury Cathedral welcomes pilgrims to this day.

Christina of Markyate

Christina was a onetime recluse who established a small community of religious women at Markyate, on the border of St. Albans's properties. Her biography survives in just one manuscript, written by a member of the St. Albans community. It tells of Christina's childhood desire to enter monastic orders, which was thwarted when her parents forced her to marry. Refusing to consummate the marriage, she fled and went into hiding for a number of years. She eventually came to Markyate (Hertfordshire, England) where she lived under the protections of Roger the Hermit, a St. Albans monk. After Roger's death (around 1121-22), Christina established a religious community at Markyate with a small group of women. She probably met Geoffrey, the Norman abbot of St. Albans around 1130.

St. Albans had long been revered as the place where Alban, England's first saint, was martyred by Romans; the abbey church also contained a shrine with Alban's relics. Christina's vita was likely commissioned by Geoffrey to enhance the stand of St. Albans as a holy site. Association with holy figures, particularly recluses, would have elevated the status of a religious institution, as happened at St. Albans when the hermits Toger and Sigar were buried in abbey church, creating new holy spaces within the church.

Now called the Cathedral and Abbey Church of St. Alban, the site is the oldest site of continuous Christian worship in Britain.



Initial C: Psalm 105, Christina Interceding with Christ (detail), about 1130. St. Albans Psalter. Tempera and gold on parchment. Dombibliothek Hildesheim, HS St. God. 1, p. 285. EX.2013.4.1.70