

Becket Reliquary

Limoges, c. 1200-10

Copper alloy, with champleve enamels, and oak: h. 17.2 cm, w. 12.1 cm

The Burrell Collection, Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries, 26/6

The enamel plaques are mounted on a solid wooden core (not original); a side and centre back panel are missing, also part of the roof cresting (now in two pieces) and an assassin's head. The front is enamelled with the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, with the apotheosis of the saint above.

Becket is mitred, before an altar on which stand a chalice and paten, book and pyx (indicated by H: host): two knights attack him, while a Manus Dei (Hand of God) emerges from a cloud above. The personified soul of Thomas rises to Heaven supported by two angels.



The side panel shows an unidentified saint standing under an arch. The heads of all figures save this and that of Thomas are cast separately and pinned on. The back (roof) is enamelled with a double row of five four-petaled flowers, bordered by a row of crosses. The colours used are opaque blues - light, mid and dark - red, green, yellow and white. Base-metal pilgrim souvenirs for Becket's cult were made in Canterbury, but the enamel reliquary chasses, of which over forty-five still survive, were produced in Limoges, mainly c.1200-50. Thomas is invariably shown at Mass, attacked by between one and three murderers, although it is a historical fact that there were four (Rupin 1890, pp. 396-9; Barlow 1986). These caskets were merely a version of the basic design of Limoges reliquary, themselves a variation upon a common type of relic container produced throughout Europe (Braun 1940, pp. 163-85). The (missing) centre back panel here would have covered a lid, hinged to allow access to the relics, the original casket being hollow.

Limoges was in the Middle Ages a large-scale manufacturer of champleve enamelled objects; more of its products have survived than from anywhere else. Characterised by vivid blues and stylised rosettes, the enamels were widely exported; many have been found in England. Limoges basins are known to have been given to Rochester Cathedral by the Prior Elias (fl. 1214-15), and in 1240 Henry III bought two pairs of Limoges basins for St Stephen's Chapel, Westminster (Lehrmann-Brockhaus 1955-60, no. 3752). This is one of the few Becket reliquaries with an English provenance of antiquity. Its association with Becket's own county by adoption is unique; it may originally have belonged to a Kentish church (Borenus 1933, pp. 177-8). MLC

PROV, John Batteley (1647-1708), Archdeacon of Canterbury; Thomas Barrett (d. 1758), of Lee Priory, near Canterbury; sold London, 21 Feb. 1758 (Barrett sale, no. 80) to Horace Walpole of Strawberry Hill; beq. to Mrs Darner; given to Dowager Countess of Waldegrave; sold by her to Walter Sneyd, 1842; possibly disposed of before 1862 (Caudron 1975, pp. 37-8); in Leopold Hirsch Coll., by 1933; bt by John Hunt; bt by Sir William Burrell, 1934; given by him to Glasgow City Art Gallery, 1958.

LIT. Cole MS 1762, ff. 151-2; Borenus 1933, p. 177, repr.; Caudron 1975, no. 3, pp. 34-8, 65-8, 102-3, 121-2; London 1975, no. 372.