

Essays in Medieval Studies 7

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There are four images in this essay;

figs. 1a, 2a, and 2b appear in the paragraphs which refer to them; fig. 1b is linked to the paragraphs which refer to it.]

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Christ Church, Canterbury: The Spiritual Landscape of Pilgrimage

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Canterbury Cathedral began as the mission church of Saint Augustine in the early seventh century and reached its full medieval expression as the pilgrimage church of Saint Thomas Becket six hundred years later in the thirteenth century. Saint Augustine had recovered an ancient Romano-British church and remodeled it in imitation of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome. This 'Roman' church became the Anglo-Saxon cathedral, was destroyed by fire in 1067, rebuilt by the Norman Archbishop Lanfranc, and enlarged by his successor, Anselm. Another great fire in 1174 destroyed much of Anselm's Norman church, and William of Sens and his successor, William the Englishman, designed the great Gothic choir which still stands today. These successive structures have had their respective physical topographies thoroughly mapped and exhaustively discussed, but the spiritual topography enclosed and protected by these physical structures remains largely unexplored.¹

Our knowledge of early Christ Church topography comes from the writings of the late eleventh-century monk Eadmer and his late twelfth-century successor, Gervase.² For both Eadmer and Gervase, the physical structure of the church was secondary to the altars and the relics associated with those altars. Clusters of altars and relics, the physical symbols of the living presence of the saints, were the towns in this sacred landscape. Both Eadmer and Gervase lovingly detail Christ Church's sacred topography, and from their descriptions we can map the spiritual landscape as it grew in the successive churches. Our maps will show this spiritual landscape to be made up of major and minor sacred spaces, spaces which are vertically oriented and cut through the floors of the physical church. Physical floors and walls function only to provide access to altars and relics arranged above and below floor level in the same vertical space.

When Saint Augustine arrived with thirty-nine monks from Rome in 597, he needed two things in his new mission church: a spiritual center from which he and his monks could work, and a structure

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which would speak to the pagans of the faith which the missionaries were preaching. With King Ethelbert's support, Saint Augustine recovered a church believed to have been built by the ancient Roman Christians, remodeled it, and consecrated it in the name of Christ.³ Augustine's remodeling established in this venerable shell a sacred space similar to that of Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome ([fig. 1b](#)), a space centered on a high altar raised on a ring crypt, with access to the relics below.⁴ Relics of apostles and martyrs, sent from Rome, established in this place a spiritual community and communication both with Rome, the missionaries' home base, and with God in heaven.⁵ This spiritual space in the apse was accessible on two levels, and the structural resemblance to Saint Peter's Basilica was reinforced, Bede tells us, by importing from Rome "all things that were necessary for the furniture and ministry of the church"--church ornaments, vestments, altar cloths, vessels and books.⁶ Liturgies and chants from Gregorian Rome were collected and codified for the use of the missionaries, and through reenacting the sacred events of the liturgy, Saint Augustine's monks brought the experience of both Rome and Jerusalem into their church.

Augustine's venerable church remained essentially unchanged through the next four and one-half centuries, and the Canterbury monk Eadmer described it as it had been when he was a boy, before the fire of 1067.⁷ Eadmer remembered


the church in its 'Roman' identity: it was "the very church which had been built by the Romans ... and was arranged in some parts in imitation of the church of the Blessed Prince of the Apostles, Peter."⁸ Eadmer tells us that the church was double-apsed, that the altars of the chancel were on a higher level than the choir, and that there was a crypt below the apse.

But for Eadmer, it was the spiritual landscape of Christ Church that was important; he describes the church in terms of its altars and relics (fig. 1b). Eadmer's description shows us that Christ Church's spiritual landscape had developed and added new residents since the days of Saint Augustine over four centuries before. In addition to the original sacred space centered on the higher altar, a second vertical space had appeared at the east end of the apse, with the Anglo-Saxon Saint Wilfrid in the altar above, and Saint Furseus below in the crypt. The area around the high altar had also expanded to include local saints dear to the monks. Saint Elphege, martyred of Canterbury, and Saint Oda, another Canterbury archbishop, now flanked the high altar, with coffins below and monuments above floor level. The matutinal altar, where the monks celebrated the first mass of the day, and the towers held other newcomers. At the

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west end of the nave, far from the monks' altars, an altar of Saint Mary, with the relic of another female saint within, served the lay congregation.

Eadmer's account thus describes three levels in the hierarchy of sacred spaces making up Christ Church's spiritual landscape: the primary space around the high altar centered on Christ, present in the Eucharist, and included probably the relics of apostles and martyrs sent by Pope Gregory from Rome, and certainly the relics of Canterbury archbishop-saints. Secondary spaces had appeared, focused on the local Anglo-Saxon Saint Wilfrid at the east end of the apse and on the Canterbury saint, Dunstan, at the matutinal altar. Of lesser importance, tertiary spaces included the saints in the upper levels of the towers and the female saints and the Virgin in the western apse, the altars accessible to the laity. Thus the archbishop-saints especially dear to the convent cluster around the most sacred eastern parts of the church, while the less popular female saints rest at the lay altar.

This ancient and venerable church burned in 1067, and in 1070 the Norman Archbishop Lanfranc rebuilt Christ Church from the ground up in the latest continental echelon-apsed style  (fig. 1a: *Canterbury Cathedral, 1070 and 1114. Archbishop Lanfranc's nave and transept chapels were kept by Archbishop Anselm when he demolished the echelon-apsed choir, shown in the dotted lines, and built his own new Glorious Choir. [After Femie.]*).⁹

The three apses and choir of Lanfranc's church stood only for about twenty-five years, then proved inadequate and were replaced by the much larger Glorious Choir of Archbishop Anselm, Lanfranc's successor. Gervase, writing a century later, could find no one who could tell him of Lanfranc's choir.¹⁰ From Lanfranc's *Monastic Constitutions*, we know only that his chancel held both the high altar and the matutinal altar, that the archbishop-saints also had altars and tombs in the chancel, and that there was a crypt below with altars.¹¹

But Archbishop Anselm had preserved the transepts and nave of Lanfranc's church when he rebuilt the choir, and Gervase faithfully details the altars with their resident saints.¹² There were altars on the main level of the church, on an upper level in the transepts, and in the crypt below.¹³ These perimeter chapels housed both Roman saints and the deceased archbishops of Christ Church, nearly all now considered saints, who nestled as close to their Roman predecessors as possible.¹⁴

Gervase carefully gives us directions to the various altars and their inhabitants. "In the upper altar is St. Blaise, in the lower St. Benedict. To the right in the lower chapel is the archbishop William ... to the left lies his predecessor Ralph ..." ¹⁵ Gervase thus defines the sa-

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cred spaces by means of their inhabitants, without much regard for the physical structure of the church. Medieval visitors and readers would understand that the spaces above and below were in fact the same spiritual space, and that the mere physical walls, floors and stairs which they must traverse to visit both parts of a single spiritual location were there only for their convenience. The physical church was, in effect, only a scaffolding around this essential church.

Laymen were of little importance in Lanfranc's church. As in the old Anglo-Saxon cathedral, a screen across the nave confined the lay congregation to the west end of the building. An altar of the Holy Cross at the east end of the nave, and the altar in the relocated oratory of Saint Mary on the north side of the nave, were the only altars available to the public; all of the other chapels and their altars and relics were restricted to the convent.¹⁶

Public pressure to visit the relics may have been one reason why Lanfranc's successor, Anselm, tore down Lanfranc's choir and began a new choir and crypt within twenty-five years. Anselm's choir, known as the Glorious Choir, was more than three times larger than Lanfranc's, with aisles and ambulatories which allowed public access to most of the altars and relics in the cathedral and, for the first time, allowed public access to these sacred spaces on more than one level.¹⁷ Only the choir, divided from the ambulatory by colonnade and marble walls, remained restricted to the monks.

The new, enlarged spiritual landscape filled the choir and crypt with a hierarchy of sacred spaces differentiated by the status of their residents. Perimeter chapels ringed the church, with upper and lower chapels filled with apostles and saints, standing as sentinels along the outer walls. These perimeter chapels had altars and relics on three levels: in the crypts, on the main level, and in reliquaries on beams suspended above the altars.¹⁸ Apostles, Roman saints, French saints, Anglo-Saxon saints and local Canterbury archbishop-saints thus surrounded the central nave and choir.


At the more sacred east end of the ambulatory lay the square chapel of the Trinity, and here a group of saints especially significant to the English church took up residence.²⁰ We find archbishop-saints Oda of Canterbury and Wilfrid of York behind the Trinity altar, and Lanfranc and Theobald of Canterbury on either side. In the crypt below lay the altar of Saint Augustine and the altar of John the Baptist, flanked by archbishops Ethelred and Eadsin. Thus this space, understood by the monks as undivided by the physical vault and

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floor that separated crypt and chapel, was the home of those saints particularly interested in Christ Church. Here dwelt an unbroken line of ecclesiastical saints, stretching from John the Baptist, who baptized Christ, through Augustine and Wilfrid, who brought Christianity to England and baptized the pagans, to Oda and Lanfranc of living memory. It was this chapel which was especially dear to Thomas Becket when he was archbishop, and it was here in the crypt where he was first buried after his martyrdom.²¹

All of these altars were available to the public, but the high altar, the most sacred place in the cathedral, remained reserved for the convent. Within the monks' choir, the high altar was dedicated to Christ and was a space particularly dense with meaning. Christ at the high altar occupied a spiritual space along with the Virgin, whose altar lay below in the crypt, and other saints, including those whose relics lay in the seven chests resting on the great beam above the altar.



With the completion of Anselm's choir and its dedication in 1114, Christ Church had taken on a new identity. It was no longer *ad instar* Saint Peter's Basilica, with a few Anglo-Saxon saints and archbishops added to an essentially Roman core, but now had found a new form which answered the particular needs of its spiritual topography. Christ reigned supreme at the high altar, joined by the Virgin and other saints and apostles from throughout the Christian world, including, in spaces of special honor, the Canterbury archbishop-saints Alphege and Dunstan, with whom the convent felt a special affinity. A second major spiritual focus had come into being around a series of local archbishop-saints in the Trinity Chapel. From the aisles and ambulatory, visitors could enter the lesser chapels with their saints who stood as sentinels around the perimeter of the church.

We can see this change from a Roman to a Canterbury identity clearly if we look at the chapel which opens off the south choir aisle  (fig. 1a). This chapel had been dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul, and the altar held their relics. Scenes from their lives covered the walls. Nevertheless, says Gervase, writing about seventy years after the altar had been dedicated, "Saint Anselm, translated there and placed behind the altar, gave his name to the altar and the tower."²² The two apostles were eventually ousted completely from their chapel. In the 1315 inventory we find listed an ivory reliquary containing the bones of Saint Paul and other Roman saints who "were in the altar of Saint Peter."²³ The reliquary was now in the great armory near the high altar.

Archbishop Thomas Becket was killed by four of King Henry's knights in the cathedral's northwest transept in December of 1170, and hastily buried in the crypt of Trinity Chapel, in front of the altars of Saint Augustine and John the Baptist. By September of 1174, pilgrims were crowding even Anselm's spacious crypt and choir.

On September 5, 1174, sparks from a fire in the city blew on to the cathedral roof and the wooden structure caught fire. But even though the choir burned and no longer sheltered the sacred landscape within its walls, the spiritual landscape remained intact. Gervase made this clear when he described the problems faced by the monks who moved the bodies of Saint Alphege and Saint Dunstan out of their exposed tombs in the ashes of the burned choir and into the shelter of the altar of the Holy Cross in the unburned nave. The saints did not want to leave their accustomed home, he wrote, and were moved "with greatest difficulty and labor, as if the saints resisted the move."[24](#)

If Saint Alphege and Saint Dunstan resisted moving from their accustomed places, the monks did not even try to move Saint Thomas from his tomb in the crypt. When the new building had reached Trinity Chapel and the area had to be cleared so that the choir could proceed, all of the other archbishop-saints were removed to new homes, but a temporary wooden chapel was built around Becket's tomb to protect it until the new chapel would be ready. Then Saint Thomas would only have to be moved upstairs into his new shrine, which, being in the same vertically-aligned sacred space, was not really a change at all.

By Easter of 1180, the new choir, higher, lighter, and vaulted, was completed, and the new tombs ready for Saints Alphege and Dunstan, who were quietly returned to their old locations  (fig. 1a)  (fig. 2a: *Canterbury Cathedral Choir, Trinity Chapel, and Corona Chapel as dedicated in 1220, showing the sacred spaces and their inhabitants. [After Britton]*).


The high altar was finished, and once again the seven gold and silver chests full of relics sat on the beam above. On Holy Saturday, the convent gathered to bring Christ back to the high altar from His temporary altar in the nave. On that night, April 19, 1180, the monks began in the chapter house with the liturgy of the Holy Fire, the Jerusalem liturgy which re-enacted the miraculous appearance of the Holy Fire in the lamps of the Holy Sepulchre during the Easter vigil.[25](#) By re-enacting this Jerusalem liturgy, they brought the light of resurrection into their new choir. Singing the hymn *Inventor Rutili*, the monks carried the fire into the church. When the procession came to the door which led from the transept where Becket had been martyred, the archbishop took from them the pix with Eucharist, which had been hanging over the temporary altar in the

nave, and carried it reverently to the new high altar in the choir. Thus, writes Gervase, "Our Lord Jesus Christ went before us into Galilee, that is, in the move into the new church."[26](#)



Becket's new shrine was built around the sacred space that we have seen developing in the old Trinity Chapel. This space, already inhabited by the line of the archbishop-saints from Canterbury and anchored to Rome by Saint Augustine and to Jerusalem by John the Baptist, had now become even more dense with meaning through memories of events enacted in the chapel in the recent past. As Gervase tells us:

This place, therefore, was prepared for him, namely the Chapel of the Holy Trinity, where he celebrated his first mass, where he prostrated himself with tears and prayers, where because of his merit God had performed many miracles, where .poor men and rich men, kings and princes venerated him."[27](#)

Becket had been buried in the chapel crypt immediately after his death, and, as we have seen, never left this space again. Here the space rose upward in demonstration of resurrection, from Becket's grave in the crypt, through his shrine, to the vaults above, hung with trophies from the Holy Land.

Two more sacred spaces developed after 1174 in response to Becket's martyrdom. The north transept, where Becket was murdered  (fig. 2b: *Canterbury Cathedral, ground plan and elevation, 1220. [After Willis]*), acquired an altar and a special keeper soon after Becket's death.[28](#) In a sense, this area partook of the already

established sacred space of the old transept altars, but was now much enhanced by Becket's martyrdom and by the relics in the new altar, which included the sword point and bits of Becket's head and blood, wood of the True Cross, the sponge of the Crucifixion, a robe of the Virgin, and relics of eight other apostles and martyrs.[29](#)

The earlier Trinity Chapel had been at the extreme east end of Lanfranc's church, and now a new chapel, called the Corona Chapel, held an altar dedicated to the Trinity  (fig. 2a)  (fig. 2b). But the most important relic in the Corona Chapel was the Crown of Saint Thomas, a mitred bust made of gold and silver, and set with precious stones, containing the crown of Becket's head, exposed so that pilgrims could touch and even kiss the martyr.[30](#)

In the choir the high altar itself had become a sacred city. The 1315 inventory lists fifty-six reliquaries, holding over four hundred

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relics, in the great armory near the altar, making this the most densely populated space in the spiritual landscape.[31](#) In addition to Christ, present in the Eucharist and in the wood of the True Cross, the Virgin Mary, apostles, saints and martyrs assembled around the altar. The Christian world was represented--saints from Jerusalem, from Rome and further afield, joined Anglo-Saxon and local Canterbury saints here at the core of the cathedral.

A medieval pilgrim would thus find within the spiritual landscape of Christ Church a number of places where there were clusters of saints. He could visit these vertically-aligned spaces, entering the same space on different levels to visit its various inhabitants. Around the perimeter of the church, in the transept altars and ambulatory chapels, he would find saints and martyrs. He could gaze at the great relics of the high altar.

But the great presence in Christ Church in the thirteenth century was Saint Thomas, who would be encountered in multiple locations within the bounds of the cathedral's spiritual landscape. A pilgrim would encounter the saint several times, touching and kissing the physical relics in the martyrdom transept, in the crypt at the old burial site, among the saints at the high altar, in the Corona Chapel, and finally, at the great golden shrine high up in Trinity Chapel, where he could complete his identification with Saint Thomas by drinking the blood of the martyr. It did not matter that the pieces of the martyr were scattered around the landscape, or even that there were too many heads of Saint Thomas--there were sometimes three--for in the spiritual landscape ordinary rules of space and matter disappeared. All of the heads were the same head, all of the Saint Thomases the same Saint Thomas.[32](#)

Within this spiritual landscape, even the identities of the holy persons could merge and flow together. Saint Thomas had been specifically identified with Christ by the monks tending the grave in the crypt of Trinity Chapel in the first days after the martyrdom.[33](#) Relics of the Passion of Christ are linked with those of Saint Thomas at the site of the martyrdom and at the high altar, and the trophies of Jerusalem flew high in the vaults above Becket's shrine. Saint Thomas himself was thus both Thomas and Christ, and the end of the pilgrim's path through Christ Church's spiritual landscape was a physical, symbolic and psychological encounter with Christ and Saint Thomas, a journey from death to resurrection.

Notes

1. The standard work for the architectural history of the cathedral is still R. Willis, *The Architectural History of Canterbury Cathedral* (London: Longman & Co., 1845). More recently, for the Anglo-Saxon church: Bede, *Historical Works*, trans. J.E. King (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930) vol. I; Nicholas Brooks, *The Early History of Canterbury Christ Church from 597 to 1066* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984); Richard Gem, "The Anglo-Saxon Cathedral Church at Canterbury: a further Contribution," in *Archaeological Journal* CXXVII (1970) 196-201; H. M. Taylor, "The Anglo-Saxon Cathedral Church at Canterbury," in *Archaeological Journal* CXXVI (1969) 101-130; and Francis Woodman, *The Architectural History of Canterbury Cathedral* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981). For the definitive edition of Eadmer's Christ Church remarks, see A. Willmart, "Opuscula: Eadmeri Cantuariensis cantoris nova: opuscula de sanctorum veneratione et obsecratione," in *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* XV (1935) 184-219, 354-379. For Lanfranc's church, in addition to Willis and Woodman, see first of all Gervase of Canterbury, "Incipit tractatus de combustione at reparatione Cantuariensis ecclesiae," in *Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury* (Rolls Series, 1879) vol. 73, i, 3-29; newer studies include Richard Gem, "The Significance of the 11th-century Rebuilding of Christ Church and St. Augustine's Canterbury," in *Medieval Art and Architecture at Canterbury before 1220* (BAA, 1982) 1-19; David Knowles, ed., *The Monastic Constitutions of Lanfranc* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1951); H. A. Strik, "Remains of the Lanfranc Building in the Great Central Tower and the Northwest Choir/Transept Area," in *Medieval Art and Architecture at Canterbury before 1220* (BAA, 1982) 20-26. For Anselm's choir, in addition to Gervase, Willis and Woodman, see Eric Fernie, "St Anselm's Crypt" in *Medieval Art and Architecture at Canterbury before 1220*

(BAA, 1982) 27-38.

2. Gervase, 3-29; Willmart, 184-219, 354-379; translations in Taylor, 1-30 and in Willis, 1-62. Unless stated otherwise, the translations in this article are the author's.

3. Bede, 175-6; Taylor, 102; Brooks, 50.

4. Taylor, 101-30; Brooks, 9, 38, 41-2.

5. Bede, 157.

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6. Bede, 157.

7. Willmart, 365-6; translated in Willis, 1-3 and Taylor, 105-6.

8. Taylor, 105.

9. Gervase, 9-12; Willis, 63-96; Taylor, 116-7; Strik, 20-26; Gem, 1982, 1-19.

10. Gervase, 12,

11. Gem, 1982, 2; Knowles, 12, 79, 137, 140.

12. Gervase, 9-11.

13. Gem, 1982, 13.

14. Gervase, 10, Gem, 1982, 3.

15. Gervase, 1.

16. Knowles, 41.

17. Gervase, 3-7 and 12-29; Willis, 37-48; Fernie, 27-38.

18. Gervase, 13-16; J. Wickham Legg and W. H. St. John Hope, *Inventories of Christ Church Canterbury* (Westminster: Archibald Constable & Company, 1902) 36, 80.

19. Willis, 38-9

20. Gervase, 16; Willis, 38-9.

21. Gervase, 21.

22. Gervase, 15.

23. Legg and Hope, 88-9

24. Gervase, 24.

25. Bernard McGinn, "Iter Sancti Sepulchri: The Piety of the First Crusaders," in *Essays on Medieval Civilization: the Walter Prescott Webb Memorial Lectures*, ed. Bede Karl Lackner and Kenneth Roy Philip (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978) 33-70.

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26. Gervase, 23.

27. Gervase, 21.

28. Legg and Hope, 125.

29. Legg and Hope, 134.

30. Legg and Hope, 39.

31. Legg and Hope, 33-43, 80-94.

32. For further reading on pilgrimage as process, see Victor Turner's studies: *The Ritual Process Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine, 1969), *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), and *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Co., 1979).

33. The monk Benedict, in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. James Craigie Robertson (Rolls Series, 1875) vol. 67, i, 43 and iv, 234.