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**Martyrs on the Move:  
The Spread of the Cults of Thomas of Canterbury and Peter of Verona**

Donald S. Prudlo, Jacksonville State University

In a recent survey of historians, Thomas Becket (1118-1170) was nominated as one of the ten worst Britons in history, and took the title for the twelfth century.<sup>1</sup> Peter of Verona (1203-1252) for his part bears the title “Prince of the Holy Inquisition,” a dubious honor in contemporary society.<sup>2</sup> That these two lay claim to sanctity perplexes the modern world, and even evokes outright hostility. For centuries both Peter and Thomas have been figures characterized by contradiction. They were often reduced to simplistic caricatures of un-reflexive and monomaniacal churchmen on one hand or of flat cut-outs of saintly paragons on the other. Such was not the case in the medieval world. Though both had their share of adversaries from the very beginning, they were foci of some of the first popular, universal cults of the period. Common people, who regularly sought the suffrages of holy men and women, flocked to both Thomas and Peter. Far from being resented and marginalized, both of their cults – especially Thomas’s – became central to European Christian consciousness. As much loved as Henry II (r. 1154-1189) is today by some scholars, it is very likely that his contemporaries might have voted

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<sup>1</sup> York Membery, “Who Were the Worst Britons,” *BBC History Magazine* 6.13 (Jan 2006). The best scholarly assessments of Thomas’s life are: Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986); and David Knowles, *Thomas Becket* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> Sixtus V, “Invictorum Christi militum” [13 April 1586], cfr. *Bullarium Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum*, 7 vols., ed. T. Ripoll (Rome: Ex Typographia Hieronymi Mainardi, 1759), vol. 5, 448. The older source for Peter of Verona’s life is: Antoine Dondaine, O.P., “Saint Pierre Martyr,” *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 23 (1953), pp. 107-134. However the current comprehensive treatment is: Donald S. Prudlo, *The Martyred Inquisitor: The Life*

him to be the “worst Briton” of the twelfth century.<sup>3</sup> As odd as the Inquisition sounds to modern ears, it was not so to the medievals.<sup>4</sup> The popular reaction to the murders of Peter and Thomas was stunning, and the velocity of the canonizations was swift. No matter how one viewed Peter’s and Thomas’s personalities, the glaring fact of their instant and enduring cults forces the conclusion that their contemporaries all over Europe saw in them, and especially in their martyrdoms, desirable and compelling prototypes for Christian perfection. The spread and extent of these cults is the subject of this study.

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Saints in the medieval period obtained and kept a place in popular devotion for one primary reason: their efficacy in performing miracles. Thomas’s and Peter’s devotees reported miracles at the very beginning of their cults, and stories of their intercession continued to pour in throughout the medieval period, making Thomas in particular one of the best known saints of the time, as well as establishing his shrine as one of the four most important pilgrimage sites in Christendom. More than seven hundred miracles were recorded by the monks at Christ Church in Canterbury during the first seven years after his death. Though the rapidity of the cult’s geographic expansion is certainly a result of the word-of-mouth tales of his martyrdom, when these were combined with subsequent stories of the remarkable number of miracles, Thomas became venerated throughout Europe.

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*and Cult of Peter of Verona*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> For an example of this transition from hatred to vindication, see: W. L. Warren, *King John* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 4-6.

<sup>4</sup> For a recent realistic assessment of the inquisition see Christine Caldwell Ames, “Does Inquisition Belong to Religious History?” *American Historical Review* 110/1 (Feb 2005), pp. 11-37.

Although other types of evidence exist - church dedications, altars, artwork, sermons, and the like also attest to the spread of saintly veneration - I will limit myself to the examination of miracle stories for the following reasons.<sup>5</sup> First, the miracle stories collected for canonization processes in the twelfth century and later represent a vast and underused element in medieval cult study and hagiography. Marginalized by many as fantastical tales, only recently have they begun to be used in scholarship. As noted above, the miracle collections for both of these saints are extensive and accessible.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the stories offer a wealth of data to analyze. Most evident are the needs and desires of the cult promoters. Their principles and strategies in the collection and editing of the stories provide a unique glimpse into the mentality and mechanics of cult promotion. All miracle collections are mediated through cult promoters, however, the result is not a one-way flow of information that monks and clerics mediated to the receptive and uncritical laity; the narratives themselves give evidence of a definite dialogue. The individual miracle stories represent a singular window into the medieval world, especially into the lives of those who are traditionally underrepresented in the conventional literature of the day: the non-

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<sup>5</sup> Literature on medieval miracles is extensive. See especially Benedicta Ward, *Miracles and the Medieval Mind: Theory, Record, and Event, 1000-1215* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982). Also significant are, André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 427-477; Caroline Walker Bynum, "Miracles and Marvels: the Limits of Alterity," *Vita Religiosa im Mittelalter: Festschrift für Kaspar Elm Zum 70. Geburtstag*, Berliner historische Studien 31, eds. Franz J. Felten and Nikolas Jaspert (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1999), pp. 799-817; R. I. Moore, "Between Sanctity and Superstition: Saints and Their Miracles in the Age of Revolution," *The Work of Jacques Le Goff and the Challenges of Medieval History*, ed. Miri Rubin (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 1997), pp. 55-67; R. C. Finucane, "The Use and Abuse of Medieval Miracles," *History* 60 (1975), pp. 1-10; J. A. Hardon, "The Concept of Miracle from St. Augustine to Modern Apologetics," *Theological Studies* 15 (1954), pp. 229-257.

<sup>6</sup> All of Thomas' miracles are edited in *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. James Cragie Robinson, vols. 1-2 (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1875), hereafter *MTB*. The primary source for Peter's miracles is *Vita S[ancti] Petri Martyris Ordinis Praedicatorum*, ed. Ambrogio Taegio, *Acta Sanctorum* 12 (Antwerp: Ioannem Meursium, 1675) Apr. III, 679-719; hereafter *VSP* (with specific source information included). This source is a combination of various thirteenth- and fourteenth-century life and miracle collections. My samples include the 775 miracles for Thomas Becket and 151 for Peter of Verona contained in these sources.

aristocratic laity. Their stories, centered around the personal experience of an extraordinary event, include everyday details of life, work, and, most pertinent to this study, geographic location. The miracle stories represent on-the-ground evidence for cultic diffusion, largely independent of clerical or aristocratic mediation implied by much of the material culture of medieval holiness. They provide evidence that shows how saints were integrated into society, and how cults themselves played a formative role in the development of culture.

Geographical and statistical analyses of miracle diffusion illustrate patterns of devotion and give the researcher a map of cultic evolution and extension.<sup>7</sup> A graphical representation of the spread of miracles can offer insight into the mechanics of cult promotion and suggest reasons why miracles predominate in a certain area, yet are absent in others. Such a study can establish patterns among the typologies of miracles. Perhaps childbirth wonders predominate in certain locations, while miracles of sensory restoration prevail in others. Maps can draw attention to these differences and suggest paths for future research. They can also suggest relations between institutions and individuals, showing how cult promoters had access to certain areas, though denied entrance to others. Significantly, a geographical analysis of miracle stories helps to de-center the cult from the shrine. Miracles often happened at the shrine and, since the stories were usually collected there, many have assumed that all medieval saints were shrine saints, marginalizing both the geographic dispersion of the wonders and the origins of the supplicants themselves. Maps readily show the gusto with which medieval people embraced concepts of

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<sup>7</sup> Efforts to quantify miracle data include Howard Clark Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), for early Christianity; Pierre-André Sigal, *L'Homme et le miracle dans la France médiévale* (Paris: Cerf, 1985) for the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries; Augustine Thompson, O.P., *Revival Preachers and Politics in Thirteenth-Century Italy: The Great Devotion of 1233* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 114-117, for the miracles of the Alleluia (and which includes Peter's ante-mortem miracles); and, Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 427-477, who breaks down 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century miracles.

sanctity, especially in these very unusual medieval cases of canonized martyrs. These maps help to demonstrate the creativity of the medieval laity in not only receiving saint's cults but in actively reformulating them to fit their own theological conceptions and rearranging them to meet their own needs.

In light of the benefits of a study of this sort, one also needs to be wary of the inherent limitations of the sources and the statistical conclusions derived from them. Few records remain of those who appealed to a saint and went away disappointed with the outcome, though the success of a cult over a period of time can suggest that successful petitioners and promoters were able to overcome any negative publicity resulting from failed requests.<sup>8</sup> When analyzing the statistics of type and location one also needs to be aware of the aims of the promoters who arranged and edited the miracle reports. In spite of this inherent bias, the rapidity of Thomas's and Peter's canonizations and the multiplication of early miracles often gives one the impression that the promoters were writing as fast as they could without much evidence of an effort aimed at implementing systems of social control. Of course, none of the statistics presented here can be absolute. The collections themselves make no pretensions to being complete so there is nothing

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed in the few recorded evidences of failed petitions, the cultic promoters immediately attribute the lack of a result to other causes besides a lack of power in their saint, for example, a lack of faith on the supplicant's part, the failure to perform a vow, or the bad disposition of the supplicant or their near relations. Evidence of failed requests can also appear when an attempt is repeated at another shrine, where it proves successful. Promoters of the successful saint are rarely adverse to mentioning the failure of competitors.



Figure 1. Map of Early Miracles of Thomas Becket. Map: author.

approaching statistical certitude. Rather the results are suggestive of overall trends. Most significantly, these narratives are very human; these are records of real people with real problems, and this is likewise true of the promoters, who alternatively express wonder and

surprise, doubt and fear. In the end the miracle collections are one of our best views into the inner life of the Middle Ages.

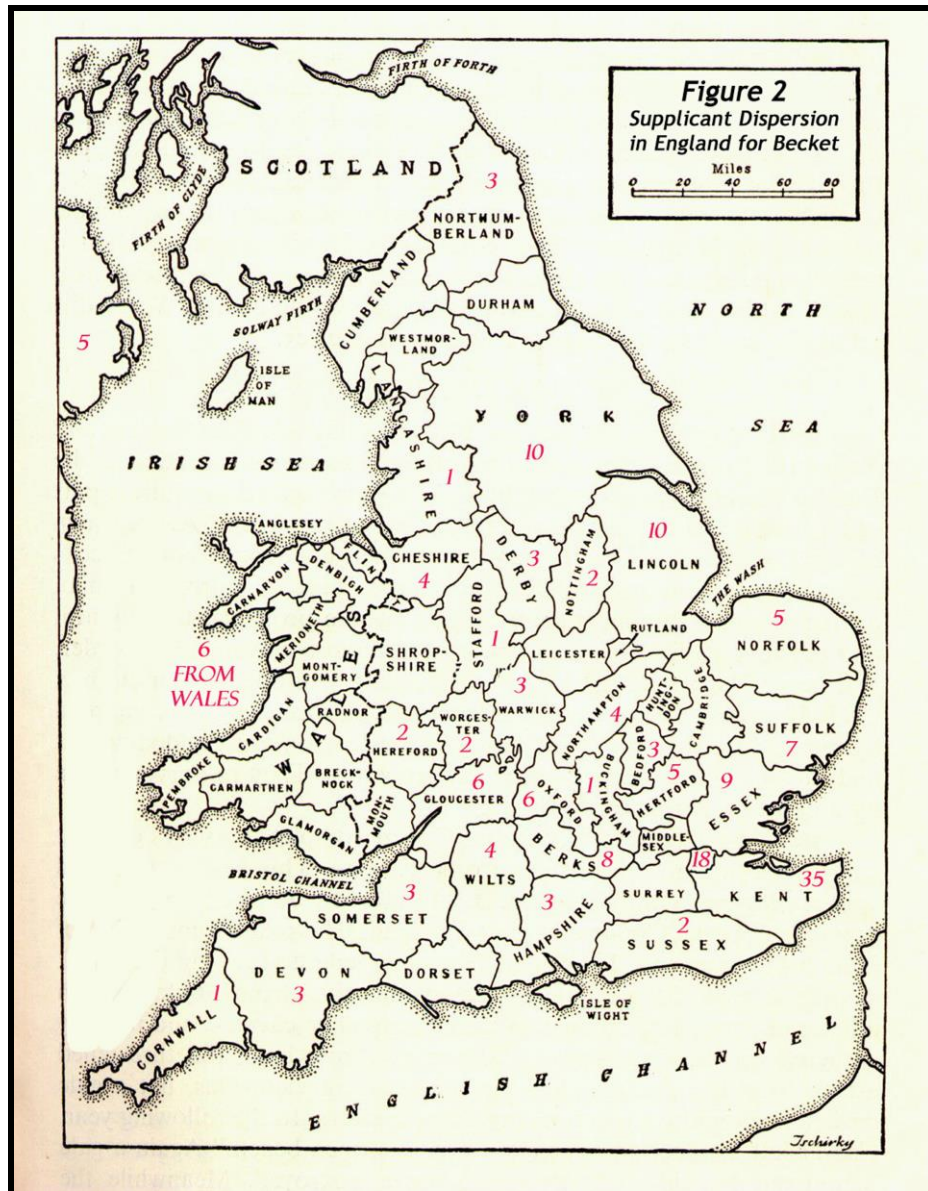


Figure 2: Map of Supplicant Dispersion in England for Thomas Becket. Map: author.

### ***The Cult of Thomas Becket***

Thomas' hagiographers reported that, while he was still lying in his blood in Canterbury Cathedral, miracles began to multiply. Word of Thomas's death spread around Europe, racing from city to city. Henry II became the subject of universal vilification, while Pope Alexander III (r. 1159-1181) raised Becket to sainthood within three years. During that time the custodians of Becket's tomb reported many miracles, while reports of wonders done far away began to filter into Canterbury to be recorded by the shrine chroniclers.<sup>9</sup> Thomas' cult was immediate and spontaneous. Even the threat of official disapproval and harassment during the first year after the murder did little to stem the tide of pilgrims coming to Canterbury either to seek or to report miracles. The small stream of supplicants eventually turned into a flood, especially after the stabilization of the political situation in the months and years following the murder.

The early map of miracle and supplicant diffusion seems very concentrated. **(Figure 1)** A large variety of miracles began very quickly to spread out from Canterbury, a phenomenon which illustrates several key points.<sup>10</sup> First, this cult spread in a very organic manner from the cultic center. Early miracles are centered in Kent. As 1171 progressed, miracles were reported from London and the Home Counties, though there was also strong representation from Lincolnshire. The dispersion of these miracles is significant since it indicates that many locales

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<sup>9</sup>As the cultic center the shrine or *martyrium* certainly holds pride of place, and it became the central clearing house for reporting miracles wherever they occurred. The task of recording these miracles diligently fell to the cultic promoters, namely the Canterbury monks in Thomas' case and the Milanese Dominicans' in Peter's. For a good overview of Christian shrines see: John Crook, *The Architectural Setting of the Cult of Saints in the Early Christian West, c. 300-1200* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to the pioneering work on Thomas' cult by Raymonde Foreville, especially her "Les 'Miracula S. Thomae Cantuariensis,'" *Actes du 97e Congrès National des Sociétés Savantes, Nantes, 1972. Section du philologie et d'histoire jusqu'à 1610. Paris, 197.* in *Thomas Becket dans la tradition historique et hagiographique* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1981), pp. 443-468; and her "La diffusion du culte de Thomas Becket dans la France de l'Ouest

far from Canterbury were the site of miracles. While ninety-two of the miracles in the first year actually occurred in the town of Canterbury, eighty-four more were scattered throughout England, with four in France, and two in Flanders.<sup>11</sup> Thus, nearly 50% of the early miracles took place away from the shrine. The map of supplicant origins tells a somewhat different story.

**(Figure 2)** Those seeking Becket's aid were more evenly distributed throughout the country.

Though one can assume that some of the sixty-five supplicants who were English, but of unspecified origin, came from Kent, still there is a marked dispersal. Petitioners came from almost every county, from Cornwall to Yorkshire, and for the first time there was evidence of foreign interest in the cult. One Fleming made an offering to Thomas in return for catching a hawk, while another had her leg healed.<sup>12</sup> When added to three cures from Picardy and Normandy, the long history of Thomas' cultic interaction with the whole of Europe began.<sup>13</sup> Initially an English phenomenon, Becket rapidly became a transnational saint, having one of the first truly universal medieval cults. By the year 1172, Becket's *fama sanctitatis* had become known throughout Europe. All Christendom was aware of his story and began to hear about the efficacy of the "New Martyr." Within the first five years of his death miracles had occurred in Austria, Scandinavia, Ireland, and the Crusader Kingdoms. Far more numerous however was the efflorescence of stories from the kingdom of France, which began to rival England in the

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avant la fin du XIIe siècle," *Cahiers du civilisation médiévale* XIX. Poitiers 1976. in *Ibid.*, pp. 347-368.

<sup>11</sup> One of the few miracles reported from France in this first year was an apparition informing the people of Argentan about the murder. This story presents Becket himself promoting his own cult! Benedict of Peterborough, "Miracula S. Thomae," *MTB*, Vol. 2, 29-30, Book 1, miracle 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 157, Book 3, miracles 55-56.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 159-161, Book 3, miracles 60-62.

production of miracle tales, so that by the time of the canonization, nearly half of the miracles came from across the channel.<sup>14</sup> These French miracles are predictably clustered in three main areas: Normandy, still very closely related to England, reported a large number of stories; and Picardy, with its proximity to the cultic center and its importance as the departure point for many continental pilgrims, was also a center of devotion. Less apparent is the reason behind the clustering of miracles in the heart of Burgundy. To answer this, one may fruitfully consult Thomas's biography. During his exile from England, Thomas's main base of operations was the Cistercian abbey of Pontigny, and he was often in residence in Sens.<sup>15</sup> Indeed it was at Sens that the preliminary legal proceedings following the murder occurred.<sup>16</sup> The Cistercians had supported Thomas in his struggle with the king, and continued to advance his cult after the murder. France was thus a focus of the cult for several reasons, not the least being Thomas's physical residence there for most of the six years prior to his death. Indeed, the greatest partisans of the cult were in the French episcopacy, which had wholeheartedly supported Thomas in his quarrel with Henry II. In addition, given the personal interest of Louis VII of France (r. 1137-1180) in the matter and the devotion of the French laity, it is no wonder that Pope Alexander III declared that he had canonized Thomas at the request of the clergy and people of France.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Only after 1171 do miracles begin to multiply in lands controlled by the English crown: the Plantagenet holdings in France. Before then it was politically inexpedient for public demonstration in favor of Becket in Henry II's French domains. Foreville simply notes the explosion of devotion to Thomas in Plantagenet France without analyzing it chronologically. Raymonde Foreville, "Les 'Miracula S. Thomae Cantuariensis,'" pp. 447-449. Also: Foreville, "La diffusion du culte de Thomas Becket."

<sup>15</sup> For Becket's exile in France see, Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, 117-197; and, Knowles, *Thomas Becket*, 101-126.

<sup>16</sup> Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, 251.

<sup>17</sup> From Cardinal Boso's life of Alexander III, cited in: *Ibid.*, 269.

Ironically England was divided about the legacy of their murdered archbishop, while France had the luxury of a united front in demanding the canonization of the principled exile.

However, it was not simply official French promotion that caused the spread of the cult. Martyrdom was still a significantly popular paradigm in the minds of medieval Christians. Even though there had been few martyrs since the days of persecution and missionary expansion, the idea of dying for the faith retained its place in the popular imagination.<sup>18</sup> Though very rare, people could still recognize a martyr quickly, and most assigned this title to Thomas from the very beginning. Becket's story fired Europe's imagination, and his status as martyr cemented him in the popular consciousness. Indeed the foibles of his life fell away from his biography as the singular fact of martyrdom penetrated Europe. Thomas was recognized not so much for his life, but for his death. Later hagiographers began to refashion his life into something resembling a saintly life, but in reality the people did not care. They had a martyr, who followed Christ to his death, and who on that account was a powerful intercessor before the heavenly throne. Thomas did not disappoint.

The actions of the papal curia in confirming Thomas' martyrdom with canonization go far to help explain the durability of the cult. His canonization by Alexander III represents one of the first real attempts of the papacy to frame and foster transnational devotion to a saint.<sup>19</sup> Papal

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<sup>18</sup> Many who died (or were thought to have died) for the faith turned out to be cases of wives murdered by husbands, workmen killed in jealous rages, political murders, or popular stories of children killed by Jews. Vauchez counts 26 of these types in the thirteenth century alone. Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, pp. 149-151. For children supposedly killed by Jews see the notes especially on pages 150-151. For the continuing popularity of martyrdom see James D. Ryan, "Missionary Saints of the High Middle Ages: Martyrdom, Popular Veneration, and Canonization," *The Catholic Historical Review* 90/1 (Jan 2004), pp. 1-28.

<sup>19</sup> This is similar to Alexander's glorification of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) a year later commending his liturgy for the whole Church. I thank Anthony Lappin for this comment.

reservation of the right to canonize was still a very new idea in the twelfth century, but one which Alexander skillfully began to mold as a canonical principle which would redound to the power and prestige of the Roman See.<sup>20</sup> Indeed Alexander's decretal *Audivimus* would later be inserted in the 1234 *Liber Extra* and become the legal foundation for the Roman right of canonization.<sup>21</sup> Thomas' murder, coupled with the evidence of widespread devotion and miracles, provided Alexander with a key opportunity both to glorify a popularly acclaimed saint as well as to secure prestige in his conflict with Frederick Barbarossa and the emperor's antipopes. The privilege of canonization by the Pope was gaining prestige in the Church and among the laity. Indeed one of the first miracles for Thomas in the collection of William of Canterbury touches on this topic. The priest Reginald of Wresham had a vision of a monastic choir. One brother asked his counterpart to begin the antiphon of the New Martyr Thomas. The other replied it was not lawful, since the Roman see had not yet "added him to the catalogue of martyrs in virtue of Apostolic authority." He suggested that since everyone was sure Thomas was a saint, they should go ahead and sing an antiphon in English.<sup>22</sup> This story illustrates nicely that while sainthood could still be popularly recognized (and patriotically celebrated), there was now a qualitative judgment to be expected from Rome. In this case papal recognition set the seal on what people already knew: Thomas Becket was a true martyr, spontaneously recognized by

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<sup>20</sup> For this process see: Vauchez, *Sainthood*, pp. 22-84; also, Eric Kemp, *Canonization and Authority in the Western Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948); and, Stephen Kuttner, "La Réserve papale du droit de canonisation," *Revue d'histoire de droit français et étranger* 17 (1938), pp. 172-228. For a newer study that focuses on the legal developments in the process see Thomas Wetzstein, *Heilige vor Gericht: Das Kanonisationsverfahren im europäischen Spätmittelalter* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Alexander III, "Audivimus." in *Corpus Iuris Canonici II (Liber Extra)*, ed. Emil Friedberg (Leipzig: 1881; reprint Graz: 1956), X 3.45.1.

<sup>22</sup> "Respondit, non eam authenticam esse; nondum enim ex apostolica auctoritate catalogo martyrum martyr

the Christian people and then officially accepted by the Church.

After the 1173 canonization Becket's cult continued to spread. His position as England's primary national patron became stronger. Becket was one of the first English saints to appeal equally to the Norman aristocrats and the lower-class descendants of the earlier Saxon inhabitants, providing a significant unifying force to national identity. Becket's supplicants came from all over England; nearly all counties are represented. Indeed, some remote counties reported great numbers of miracles. Within the first seven years after the murder, Yorkshire reported twenty-four, Lincolnshire fourteen, Gloucestershire fourteen, and Devon nine: by 1171 almost 50% of the miracles occurred at a distance from the shrine. By 1177 53% of English miracles, and 70.3% of the total number, were reported from locations far removed from Canterbury. Given this data, scholars need to reappraise the image of Becket as a "shrine saint." For instance, Raymonde Foreville's analysis of the miracles was focused on the act of pilgrimage, and drew a picture of a saint intimately attached to the shrine – though she was very thorough in showing supplicant origins.<sup>23</sup> This view needs to be altered. People made the pilgrimage to Canterbury to report miracles as often as they did to seek them. At any one time a large group of pilgrims to Thomas' tomb would be there to return thanks to the martyr for favors already received. Clearly Thomas's cult needs to be de-centered from the moorings of the shrine. His cult was universal, not only in veneration, but also in the origins of the supplicants and in miracle dispersion.

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ascriptus erat." William of Canterbury, "Miracula S. Thomae," *MTB*, Vol. 1, 150-151, Book 1, miracle 11.

<sup>23</sup>Foreville, "Les 'Miracula,'" pp. 445-451.

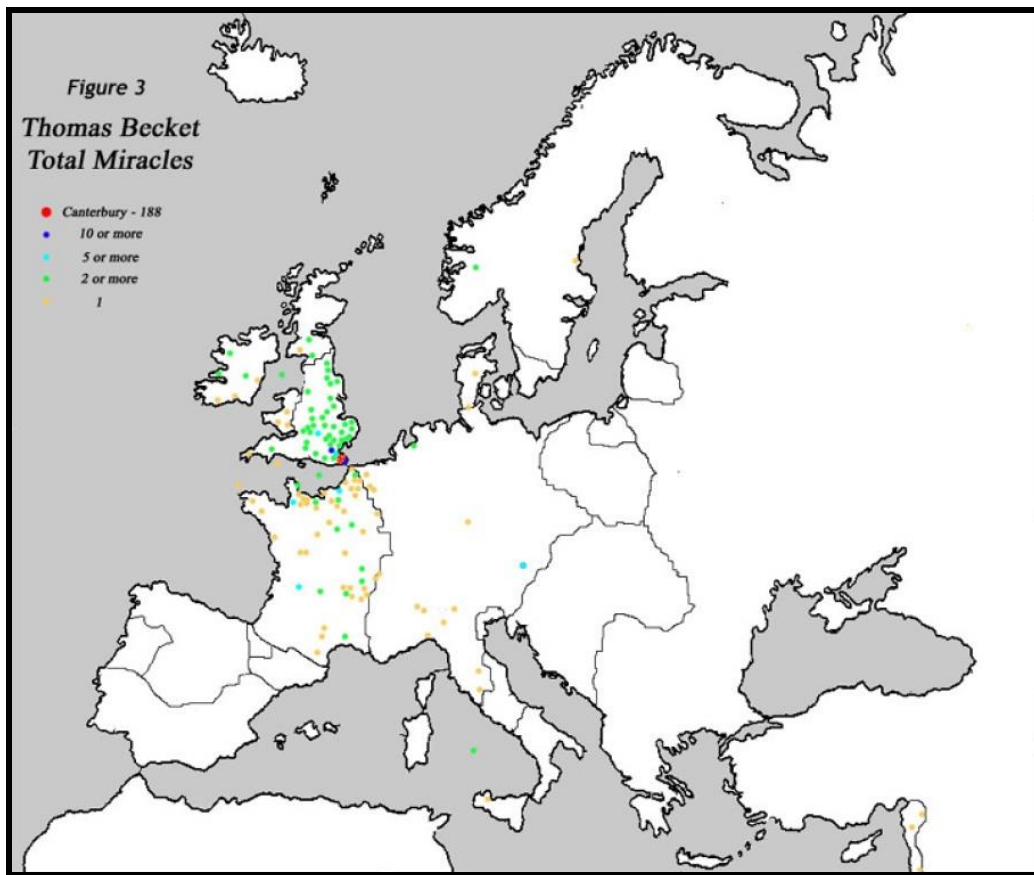


Figure 3: Map of Thomas Becket, Total Miracles. Map: author.

One must still give an account of the way in which the cult spread throughout Europe. Several things are apparent from the geographic pattern of the individual miracles. **(Figure 3)** Reports from England and France predominate. As the places that were most immediately familiar with the living saint, they were naturally the places where the cult would take immediate root. Nine miracles were reported in Ireland, significantly from Norman nobles fighting there for Henry II. There were no reports from the native Irish; not only did they already have their own saints, but Henry II's incursion into the country – undertaken partly to escape from the notoriety he gained following Becket's murder – could have done little to endear an English saint to that

island, even one who had been in conflict with Henry. It was similar with Wales and Scotland, both interested in maintaining their distance from England at that time. Wales only reported six miracles attributed to Becket in the whole period, whilst Scotland only had nine, fewer than many individual English counties. One of the main effects of Thomas Becket's cult was an increase of English nationalism, something which the Celtic peoples would come to view with some apprehension.<sup>24</sup> Fourteen miracles were reported from Italy, a relatively large amount compared to the other European regions. This is probably because Thomas was specially favored by Pope Alexander III, and English pilgrims traveled the roads from France to Rome, bringing the story of their "New Martyr" with them.

As the map shows, two large gaps in Europe stand out. No miracles were reported in Spain, which is somewhat puzzling. Spain generally supported Alexander III, so opposition to papal policy cannot be the reason. The Spanish kingdoms were very much occupied with the *Reconquista* at this time, were being hard pressed by the Almohads, and did not figure much into the Church-State battles of the 1170s. Another thing to consider is the privileged position of Santiago de Compostela at this time as one of the greatest pilgrimage sites in Europe. Spaniards would have had little interest in the opening of a significant new shrine, one which could siphon off many of the English and French pilgrims who eagerly came to Santiago. The other large gap is the huge expanse of Frederick Barbarossa's German Empire. Excepting the statistical anomaly of seven miracles from Klosterneuburg in Austria, where a devout knight named Ludwig had brought relics from England for which a chapel was constructed at the monastery of Augustinian

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<sup>24</sup> For a discussion about the problems of the construction of English national identity see Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), particularly chapter 4.

canons,<sup>25</sup> there was only one miracle from the immense area of Frederick's empire: the resurrection of a dead child in Bamberg.<sup>26</sup> In light of the humbling of Henry II after Becket's death and the emperor's continued support of antipopes, Barbarossa probably looked on the extension of Thomas' cult into his lands with extreme disapproval. Since the majority of the miracle stories take place before 1177, about the time Frederick I (1194-1250) ceased his opposition to Rome, there is little to no evidence of Becket veneration in German-speaking lands. Thus, although Thomas's cult must be de-centered from the shrine, the fact remains that its expansion fell somewhat short of complete penetration of Europe. Though centered primarily in England and France, Becket still represents one of the first transnational saints.

### ***The Cult of Peter of Verona***

Peter of Verona's story is very similar to that of Thomas. His *vita* relates that within hours of Peter's murder on the road north of Milan, thousands were streaming out of the city gates to meet his body. So great was the throng that his brethren could not carry him into the city that night and had to lay him in a temporary sarcophagus within the church of San Simpliciano, outside of Milan's walls. That very night the poor and sick were among those who visited his body. A miserable woman named Jacoba, who had a fistula in her hand, knew what to do. With great difficulty she worked her way through the throng until she came to Peter's body. She caused his hand to make the sign of the cross over her fistula, a gesture she may have seen him

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 518-520, Book 6, miracles 129-134.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 541, Book 6, miracle 163.

make when alive. She reported instant healing, and Peter's cult was off to a rapid start.<sup>27</sup>

Peter's cult was fortunate in that a "perfect storm" of overlapping motivations propelled it into international recognition. The first was the genuine devotion of the people of Milan. From the sources one can see that Peter was genuinely loved there during his life. He was known as a discerning confessor, a skilled spiritual director, a kind man, and a powerful preacher. It was the enthusiasm of the people of his city that impelled the initial public recognition of his cult. Coupled with this was the excitement of the Dominican order. Initially in deep mourning for their lost brother, it did not take the friars long to realize the immense asset they had just acquired. In contrast to the canonization of three wildly popular members of the Franciscan order – Francis in 1228, Anthony in 1232, and Elizabeth of Hungary in 1235 – the Dominicans only had the tardy canonization of Dominic in 1233 to their credit, and he did not possess a generally popular cult. With Peter and his martyrdom, the Dominicans realized they had a genuinely popular saint to hold up against the Franciscans. Finally, the interests of the papacy at this period were intertwined with those of the mendicant orders. Innocent IV (c. 1195-1254), recently triumphant against Emperor Frederick II, saw the murdered Dominican as an ideal anti-imperial and anti-heretical saint.<sup>28</sup> Peter had opposed the empire during his life and had ceaselessly hounded the heretics of northern Italy. Glorifying Peter would not only reinforce Innocent's victory, but would also do much to enhance papal prestige and bolster papal policy. The

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<sup>27</sup> VSP, 5.40<sup>1</sup>, 698, [Agni, ca. 1270].

<sup>28</sup> Michael Goodich, *Vita Perfecta: The Ideal of Sainthood in the Thirteenth Century*, Monographien zur Geschichte des Mittelalters, 25 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1982), p. 24, and "The Politics of Canonization in the Thirteenth Century," *Church History* 44 (1975), pp. 294-307. He considers Peter's canonization as the climax of anti-heretical and anti-imperial papal policy, though this is oversimplified. The greatest threat from the empire had already passed by 1253, and the papacy would be concerned with heresy long into the future.

combination of these three factors produced a near-instantaneous result. After a rapid investigation of Peter's life and miracles, Innocent IV canonized Peter 337 days after his murder – the fastest papal canonization in history.<sup>29</sup>

The news of Peter's murder quickly spread throughout Europe, and most contemporary chronicles noted the date. Given the velocity of his glorification, there was not much time to compile miracle stories. However, one can pick out a small group of nineteen narrative units that form the body of pre-canonization miracles. These date from his death in April of 1252 to his canonization in March of 1253. The miracle stories came from the areas where the saint had been active during his lifetime, primarily locations around Milan (13), with two stories from Florence, and one miracle each from Pavia, Venice, Lugano, and Brescia.<sup>30</sup> They represent the earliest geographic distribution of the saint's cult. One can see that this was an organic development: the people who knew the saint most intimately were also the ones who were reporting cures. A ring of about 150 miles could be drawn around Milan, and this would represent not only the primary area of Peter's biography, but also of his immediate cultic afterlife.

This picture is too simplistic however. If the early miracles represent the investigation performed before the canonization – which I believe they do – then the short amount of time precluded the inclusion of miracles from outside of the immediate area of investigation (which

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<sup>29</sup>Innocent IV, "Magnis et Crebris," *Bullarium Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum*, Vol. 1, 228-230.

<sup>30</sup> Pre-canonization miracles are determined by the order given in a late thirteenth-century vernacular Italian version of Thomas Agni's *vita* in Novara: Biblioteca Comunale MS 10, fols. 44-74<sup>v</sup>. I am of the opinion that this is a translation of the early canonization proceedings. Later, when Peter's story was first compiled, editors eliminated the chronological report of miracles in favor of a topical arrangement.

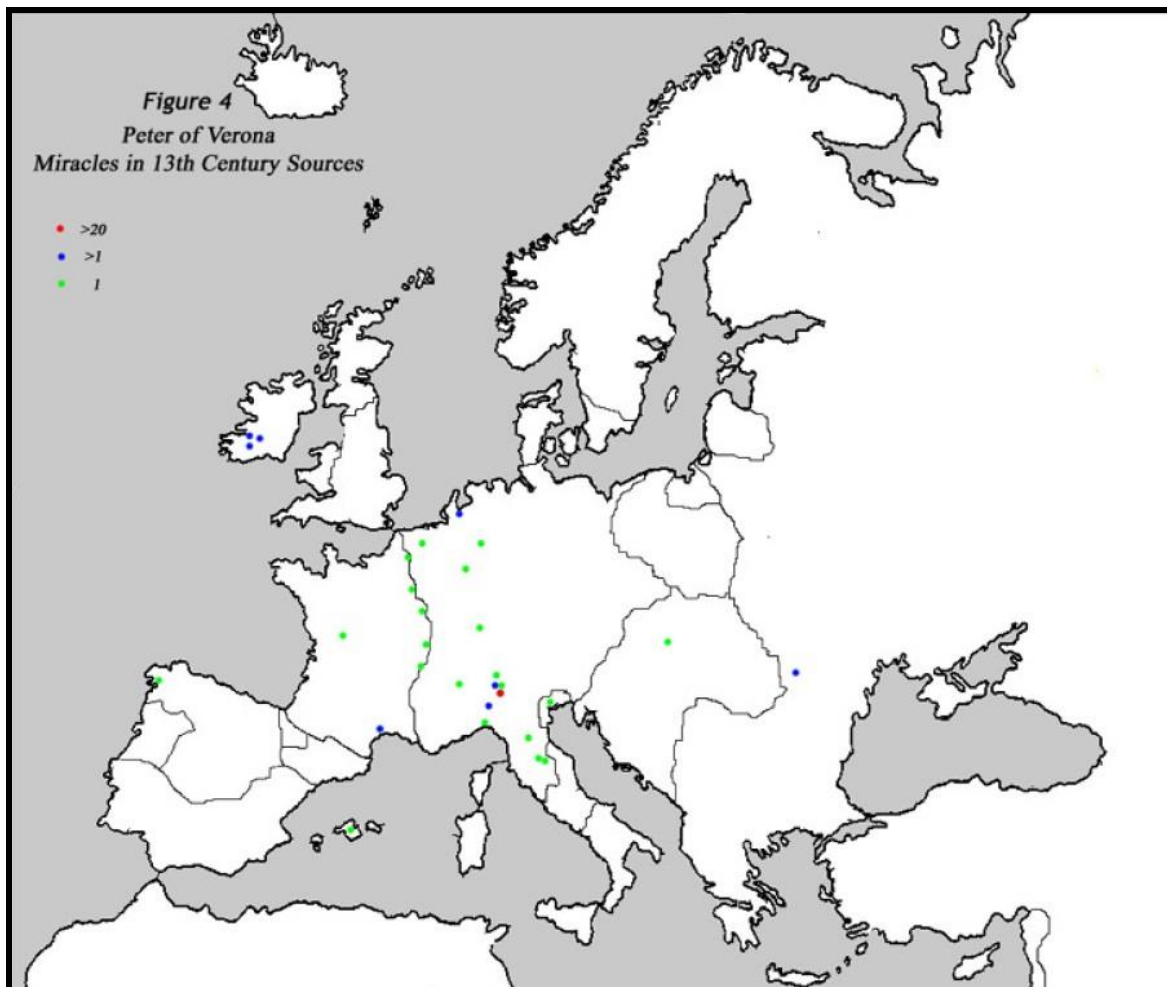


Figure 4. Map of Peter of Verona Miracles in 13th-century Sources. Map: author.

took place in Milan).<sup>31</sup> This is aptly shown by a miracle reported in Gérard de Frachet's 1259 *Vitae Fratrum*. In this story, a Dominican tells an abbot near Poitiers to pray to the yet-uncanonized Peter for relief from his terrible headaches.<sup>32</sup> This miracle must have occurred

<sup>31</sup> Michael Goodich was the first to provide this hypothesis in his: *Vita Perfecta: The Ideal of Sainthood in the Thirteenth Century*, Monographien zur Geschichte des Mittelalters, 25 (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1982), p. 151, though I have augmented and expanded his arguments in my own work.

<sup>32</sup> *VSP*, 9.72<sup>2</sup>, 708; Gérard de Frachet, O.P., *Vitae Fratrum Ordinis Praedicatorum*, Monumenta Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum Historica 1, ed. Benedict Maria Reichert, O.P. (Louvain: E. Charpentier & J. Schoonjans, 1896), p.

before March of 1253, when Peter was canonized. It happened so soon after Peter's death that there was no time for its inclusion into the primitive collection of miracles probably used as material for the investigation. Such a miracle, coming so early in the cult's life from so far away is not a statistical anomaly, rather it indicates the rapid expansion that Peter's cult would experience within twenty years of the canonization. As the story of the healed abbot shows, it was an expansion in part propelled by the devotion and interest of the Dominican order.

While there are far fewer miracles in Peter's sources than in Thomas's, one can still form a good idea of the spread and extent of the cult. The early stories come from all over Europe. Out of seventy-one miracles, thirty-four came from Italy (47.9%) while two were from Provence. The rest were from all over the Europe: no fewer than thirteen miracles from Ireland, eight from France, four from Flanders, two from Germany, and one each from Hungary, Aragon, Castile and León, and Bohemia. **(Figure 4)** In addition, the missionary appendix of the *Vitas fratrum* listed four miracles performed in Peter's name in the eastern Hungarian territories. Unlike Thomas, fewer miracles occurred at Peter's shrine (only 14.1% of the early miracles), though pilgrimage to the tomb at Sant' Eustorgio was a significant factor in the cult. But similar to Thomas's, Peter's cult exhibited a marked and pan-European diffusion. Many places which were associated with Peter's life reported miracles after his death. This is consistent with the data presented on Thomas above. Indeed one can also trace two of Peter's possible foreign trips in the miracle trail. In 1249 Peter traveled through Germany to the General Chapter of the Dominican order in Trier, while at another time he made a trip to Paris, perhaps for another general chapter. If one looks at the pattern of miracles in the thirteenth century, it is possible to speculate that the

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242. Hereafter *VF*.

routes which Peter took to those two events are represented in the geographic dispersion of the miracles.

There are in addition many stories which are impossible to connect to the living saint, beginning with the Poitiers miracle in western France. Other strange miracle locations appear on the map: a 1259 miracle account from Santiago de Compostela in Spain that narrates the healing of a crippled beggar; a man named Dominic cured of a stomach complaint in Mallorca; four miracles from the eastern Hungarian missions; the thirteen miracles reported from southwestern Ireland. It is possible to trace most of these back to the aggressive Dominican presentation of Peter to the communities where the friars ministered. When the Dominicans expanded, they carried their saints with them. In Peter of Verona they had a powerful cultic ally – an individual whom they considered to manifest the best characteristics of the order. Sometimes Dominic and Peter were the first saints of whom new Christians would hear, as in the missions to the Hungarian Cumans, so miracles involving Peter are fairly predictable in this case.<sup>33</sup> At other times, the miracle stories have overtones of Peter's superiority over other saints. The miracle from Compostela is indicative of this. Peter could help where other powerful saints could not. The cured beggar lived in the city of Saint James, one of the most important pilgrimage sites in Christendom. Santiago did not help, whereas the "New Martyr" provided immediate healing.<sup>34</sup>

Official Dominican sponsorship provided Peter with an immediate and Europe-wide cadre of elite preachers to tell people about his cult. It is no wonder that miracle reports

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<sup>33</sup> *VF*, 208-209.

<sup>34</sup> *VSP*, 12.93, 713, [*VF*, 245-246, ca. 1259], this miracle is itself dated to 1259 in the text.

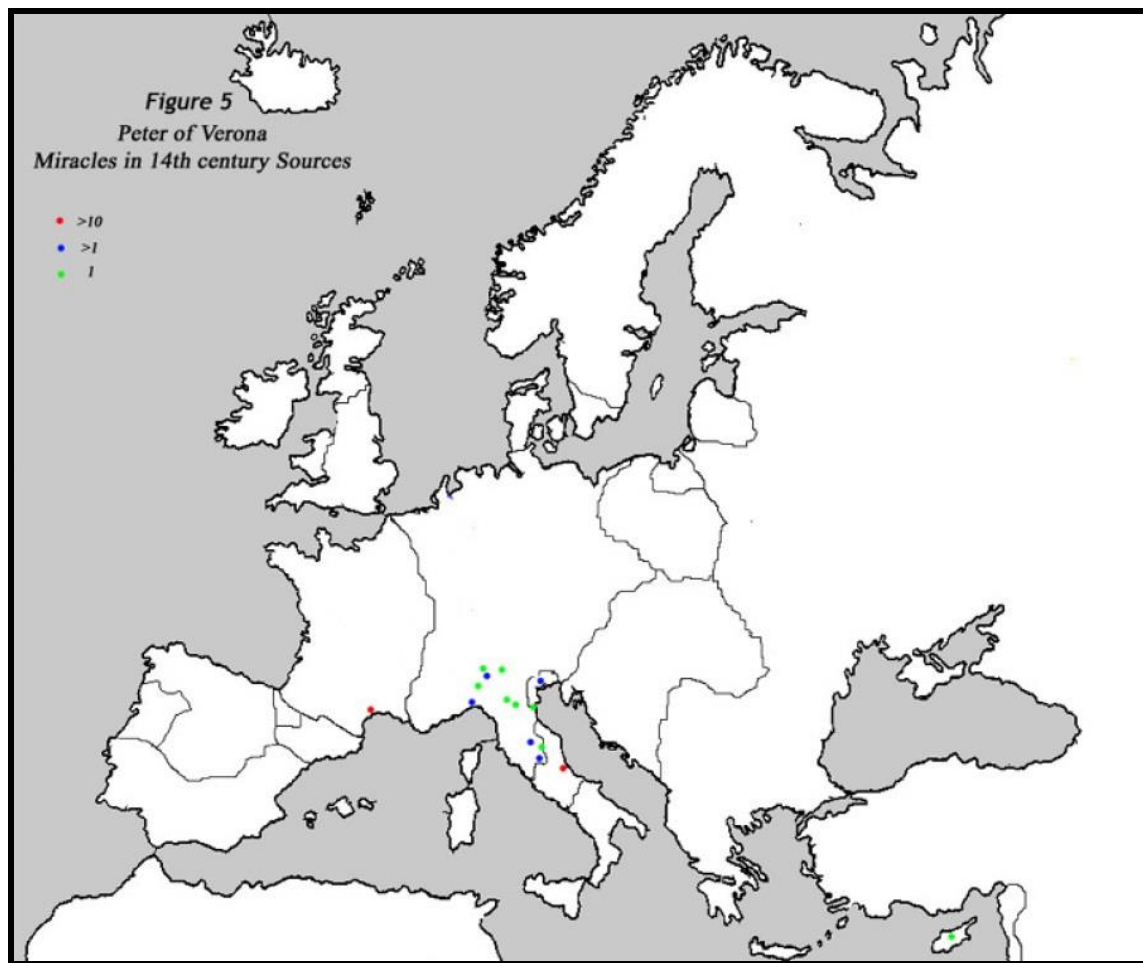


Figure 5. Map of Peter of Verona Miracles in 14th-century Sources. Map: author.

immediately began to come in from the far corners of Christendom. Peter was a genuinely popular saint who had been widely loved during his life among those to whom he ministered and the friars were able effectively to communicate that popularity throughout Europe. Peter had also been credited with working miracles when he was alive, so the Dominicans had a ready-made body of stories for preaching right from the beginning.<sup>35</sup> They effectively organized the cult,

<sup>35</sup> For miracle working among the Mendicants in this period see Augustine Thompson, O.P., *Revival Preachers and Politics in Thirteenth-Century Italy: The Great Devotion of 1233* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 179-204.

turning Sant' Eustorgio into a model pilgrimage Church, they composed a mass and office for him to be said yearly, and they aggressively carried his relics and story wherever they traveled. In this Peter had an advantage that Thomas did not, a virtual army of accomplished preachers for whom Peter was the image of their highest ideals.

However, in the fourteenth-century hagiography, Peter's cult contracted. Almost all of the miracles reported came from the Dominican heartland of Provence, and northern and central Italy. **(Figure 5)** The lone exception was a well-attested birth miracle from Cyprus.<sup>36</sup> This may represent a coalescence of the cult from its initial days of international propagation to the fall back locations of the places where it was truly popular. It can also be explained by failure of the more remote Dominican priories to report miracles for Peter. From the typologies of the miracles one can see that in this period the more mundane cures were marginalized in favor of the narration of extraordinary wonders, dramatic resurrections, and vengeance miracles. The everyday miracle of healing was no longer of much interest to the cult promoters; rather they needed new and exciting tales to fire the imaginations of their listeners.

Though important, mere Dominican will to promote Peter was not the central factor in the maintenance of Peter's cult throughout the Middle Ages. Just as with Thomas Becket, the type of death Peter suffered was sensational. Martyrdom was compelling and rare, and people very much valued it. To medieval people it seemed that the fact of the martyrdom granted Peter special status, one which promised immediacy of intercession. His hagiography is heavy with the term "New Martyr," one which had also been applied to Becket.<sup>37</sup> The novelty of this type of

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<sup>36</sup> *VSP* 8.63, 705-706. [Berengar, 1316].

<sup>37</sup> The title appears at the beginnings of Becket's cult, and is found throughout Peter's hagiography. Vauchez notes

death in the Middle Ages struck a chord with Christians, and those who merited the title were doubly honored in the middle ages. Tied to this was official recognition of the martyrdom. The special care that the papacy took in swiftly glorifying Peter and applying the title “martyr” to him significantly helped the cult, as it had helped Thomas’s. Both canonizations clearly spelled out papal policy and put the Pope right at the center of the recognition of sanctity in the Church. Indeed Peter of Verona’s cult represents the first effort of the papacy to sustain and maintain a transnational cult over a period of time. Especially between 1254 and 1266, the popes were very active in mandating the observance of Peter’s feast, granting indulgences to pilgrims, and fulminating against cultic abuse. For previous saints the papacy had been content to issue the bull of canonization and leave it at that, but for various political reasons the popes felt it necessary to foster Peter’s cult. Though this paper is too short to analyze this phenomenon in depth, I contend that this extraordinary patronage was due to the fact that Peter’s cult was the first papal cult to meet significant opposition from imperial loyalists and especially heretics. This opposition occurred during the development of the theology of papal infallibility in canonization, making it imperative for the Popes to begin to defend their saints. Becket’s cult did indeed face opposition in England, but mostly before his canonization. After the fact, opposition became muted.

Most directly, though, Peter’s cult, like that of Thomas Becket, found continued popularity because of its presumed efficacy. Miracle stories poured in from all over Europe, were duly recorded by the guardians of the shrine, and then (especially in Peter’s case) publicized far and wide in the preaching of the cultic promoters. Indeed the laity often themselves touted the

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that the denominator “new” had eschatological overtones, perhaps of saints who had fulfilled an image with archetypal perfection. Vauchez, *Sainthood*, p. 111.

successful results of the saints' patronage. Apart from the apparatus of official cultic promotion, the cults of Thomas and Peter owed their existence to their ability to draw new devotees.

### *Factors in the spread of the martyrs' cults*

I have pointed to many factors that influenced the quick spread of the cults of Peter of Verona and Thomas Becket over so large an area, but several are essential to understanding this new phenomenon: the transnational saint in medieval Europe. When a saint's cult is focused at a discrete location, usually the shrine where he or she is buried, there is limited opportunity for the laity to come into physical contact with it. Even though miracles did occur without any tangible connection to the physical remains of the saint, people wanted something more. This period was suffused by the desire to be in the physical presence of the holy, a phenomenon evidenced by the Catholic liturgy, by the popularity of the external forms of Christian worship, and especially by arduous and difficult pilgrimages.<sup>38</sup> Miracle stories of the period evince this desire; people made vows of pilgrimage,<sup>39</sup> they rubbed themselves in dirt and dust in the places of martyrdom,<sup>40</sup> they slept in shrines (a practice called incubation),<sup>41</sup> and they forcibly held epileptics and the

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<sup>38</sup> Many of these manifestations of lay piety are described in the broader context of medieval Italy in Augustine Thompson, *Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes, 1125-1325* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> Almost 7% (53) of Thomas' miracles involve a vow of pilgrimage.

<sup>40</sup> *VSP*, 5.43<sup>3</sup>, 699. [Agni, c. 1270].

<sup>41</sup> Benedict of Peterborough, "Miracula S. Thomae," *MTB*, Vol. 2, 74, Book 2, miracle 24.



Figure 6. Pilgrim Ampulla, Canterbury Cathedral, England, 13th century, tin. Collection: Cluny Museum. Photo: Sarah Blick.

possessed in front of tombs and altars.<sup>42</sup> When immediate presence at the shrine was unavailable however, people could rely on a further method to achieve physical presence: relics.<sup>43</sup> From early

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<sup>42</sup> *VSP*, 13.105, 716. [Berengar, 1316].

<sup>43</sup>For medieval relics see Philippe George, "Les reliques des saints. Publications récentes et perspectives nouvelles," *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 80/2 (2002), pp. 563-591; Godefridus Snoek, *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist: A Process of Mutual Interaction* (New York: Brill, 1995); Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); *Holy Feast and Holy*

in the history of the Church relics were a realistic way to extend the veneration of a saint and to broaden the reach of the holy. But relics themselves were limited, there was only so much of a saint's physical body to go around. Though the unscrupulous did sometimes try to pass off bits and pieces of inauthentic relics, by and large this was not a problem, especially with well-known, contemporary saints. The creative interaction of the laity provided an answer. In a continuation of Early Christian practice, they came to the tombs and rubbed clothing, linens, crosses, or anything else they had on the bones or the tomb. In this way they sought to communicate some of the inherent power of the shrine into their everyday items which they could then bring back to their own towns and villages. In effect the laity circumvented the close clerical control of the major relics and set up for themselves independent access to the power of the saint, and in doing so created a lay-run paraliturgical system of miracle working.

In the twelfth- and thirteenth-centuries, a new form of relic extension became very popular. This was the creation of "Saint Water."<sup>44</sup> This was water poured over the saint's body or bones, and which was reputed to have very powerful healing powers. Some evidence suggests that this practice may have begun when sick people drank the leftover water that remained after the initial washing of a dead saint's body (people in the Middle Ages did not wait for niceties

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*Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987); and Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). Older, but still useful studies include: Wilfred Bonser, "The Cult of Relics in the Middle Ages," *Folk-Lore* 73-74 (1962-63), pp. 234-256; Heinrich Fichtenau, "Zum Reliquien wesen in früheren Mittelalter," *Mitteilungen der Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 60 (1952), pp. 60-89.

<sup>44</sup> For methods of healing by ingestion of holy or relic-sanctified water see: Pierre-André Sigal, "Naissance et premier développement d'un vinage exceptionnel: l'eau de saint Thomas," *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale, Xe-XIIe siècles* 44:1 (2001), pp. 34-44; Colin Morris, "San Ranieri of Pisa: The Power and Limitations of Sanctity in Twelfth-Century Italy," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45 (1994), pp. 588-599; and, Ward, *Miracles*, p. 101.

such as formal canonization to decide who was a saint).<sup>45</sup> Such water had more immediate effect than the second- or third- class relics made by simply touching clothing to the tomb. Indeed the laity creatively appropriated this new type of relic as well, applying the water to injured areas as well as ingesting it – the most popular method. In this manner the cult could be spread as far as the water could be carried. **Figure 6** shows an example of such a pilgrim's ampulla from the Museum of London. Indeed some very early miracles of Peter of Verona come from southwestern Ireland, nearly 1000 miles away from the cultic center of Milan, (**Figure 7**) and all are water miracles.<sup>46</sup> These miracles seem to have led to the foundation of the Dominican priory of St. Peter of Verona at Lorrha, in northern Tipperary. (**Figure 8**) Contact with this form of relic was seen as the equivalent of physical presence, indeed it may have been considered even better. Here was a chance to internalize physically the power of the saint. One could literally “drink” the saint, causing some of the most intimate and powerful contact possible in an age which demanded physical proximity to holiness. While this type of miracle was common for Peter – 9.9% of his miracles occur in virtue of the relic water – fully 20% (155 miracles) of Thomas’s miracle stories transpire after contact with the water. Here was an unmixed boon for the cultic promoters. In giving relic water they really gave away nothing. They lost no control over the primary bodily relics while at the same time extending the geographical reach of their cults.

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<sup>45</sup> “Puer quidam inflaturam habens in collo et gurgure valde magnam, cum de aqua quae de lotionis vasis, ubi B. Petri Mart. reliqui repositi fuerant, bibisset, illico totam illam saniem evomere coepit, ita quod infra tres dies fuit plenissime ac perfecte liberatus.” *VSP*, 14.110<sup>5</sup>, 717 [VF, 242, ca. 1259]. It is little wonder that such a potion had an emetic effect!

<sup>46</sup> *VSP*, 14.108-110, 717, [Agni, ca.1270]. All of the miracles with identifying information come from the area around Limerick.



Figure 7. Tomb of St. Peter of Verona by Giovanni di Balduccio Church of Sant' Eustorgio Milan. 1339. Italy. Photo: Wikipedia Commons.

To underscore further the point of geographic dispersion, only 23.9% of Thomas' water miracles occurred at Canterbury, the rest were scattered all over Britain and Europe. This extension enabled Thomas and Peter to become truly transnational saints from a very early period.



Figure 8. Priory of St. Peter of Verona at Lorrha, Tipperary, Ireland, 1296-15th century. Photo: author.

### *Conclusion*

Peter and Thomas could have both had very successful local cults, like so many before them in the early Middle Ages, but several factors intervened that thrust them into the international spotlight. The increase in trade, travel, and general order in Europe meant that it was easier to carry the news of new saints. The facts of their martyrdom appealed widely to the European Christian population. The nascent practice of papal canonization set an increasingly important seal of approval on both their lives and miracles. Finally, in Peter's case, an aggressive

and competent body of preachers spread out over Christendom to reinforce the presence and power of the new saint. These elements came together for Peter and Thomas in significant ways to make their cults international and to undergo a wide geographic dispersion.

Though this work has shown some overall trends, much remains to be done. The miracle stories themselves have much to tell, and offer exciting insights into the medieval religious world. If this project can be tied to a broader analysis of cultic trends – altar and church dedications, naming practices, confraternities, and such – a fuller picture of cultic dispersion will appear. Indeed perhaps the most important aspect of such a cultic analysis shows that both Thomas and Peter were genuinely popular saints, especially in the years immediately following their deaths. Consecrated by the aura of martyrdom, and sanctioned by the increasingly effective official stamp of canonization from Rome, both Peter and Thomas had long cultic existences. In truth, to those who today malign them as narrow and petty individuals, and who could never picture them firing the imagination of a continent, the vast majority of the saints' contemporaries would beg to differ. 