

CHAPTER II

SINGLE REPRESENTATIONS OF ST. THOMAS BECKET

IN attempting a survey of the iconography of St. Thomas Becket, the question must first be considered whether there exist any representations of the Archbishop dating from his lifetime.

The only category of examples that deserves serious attention in this connection is that formed by such seals as are either definitely known to have been used by the Archbishop himself or else are reputed to have been so used. Their number is not large—four in all ; and the one which is undeniably authentic¹—a counterseal appended to a charter in the Public Record Office—is unfortunately quite irrelevant to our enquiry, as the figured portion of it is simply a classical intaglio of the god Mercury.² The three others all contain a conventional figure of an archbishop, in pontificals, with mitre and crozier, imparting the benediction. One of these seals must, however, undoubtedly be regarded as a forgery ; and another is probably nothing but a replica of the seal of St. Thomas's predecessor Theobald, with the inscription slightly recut—perhaps by a forger—so as to tally with the name of his successor. Of both the seals casts exist in the collection of the Society of Antiquaries. Of a

¹ Reproduced in *The Archeological Journal*, Vol. XXVI (1869), plate facing page 84. The inscription on the seal is : SIGILLVM TOME LVND+.

² One wonders if this was the "green gem" in the ring worn by St. Thomas at the time of his death, which subsequently came into the possession of the Abbey of Glastonbury.

third, only a woodcut is known, first published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1848¹: it has frequently been reproduced² and doubts on its authenticity were expressed as far back as 1869 by Mr. Albert Way.³ I am told that some years ago it was recognized by the late Mr. Ready, cast-maker of the British Museum, as one of his father's imitations of mediæval seals,⁴ and it rather adds to the piquancy of the situation that it was this Mr. Ready *père* who concurred in Mr. Way's doubts as to the genuineness of the two other examples.

The very earliest posthumous representation of St. Thomas Becket known to us is a single figure: it is the one which occurs among the Byzantine mosaics of the cathedral at Monreale in Sicily (Plate II, fig. 1) and as the whole building, mosaics and all, is understood to have been completed in an almost inexplicably brief period, between 1174 and 1182, this mosaic would at most be separated by twelve years from the date of the martyrdom. As to the reason which prompted the inclusion of this recently canonized saint among those represented in these mosaics who were of so much more ancient standing in the Catalogue of Saints, it is really not far to seek: for the builder of Monreale Cathedral, William the Good of Sicily, was in 1177 married to Princess Joan, daughter of Henry II of England. Whether, all circumstances considered, it could be regarded as "a compliment to his English bride," as it has been called, is another matter. The rendering of St. Thomas is a

¹ Cf. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, November 1848, Vol. XXX, N.S., p. 494.

² E.g. in J. R. Green, *A Short History of the English People*, illustrated edition, London, 1892, Vol. I, p. 201; and in Mr. Egerton Beck's article "The Mitre and Tiara in Heraldry and Ornament" in *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. XXIII (August 1913), p. 263.

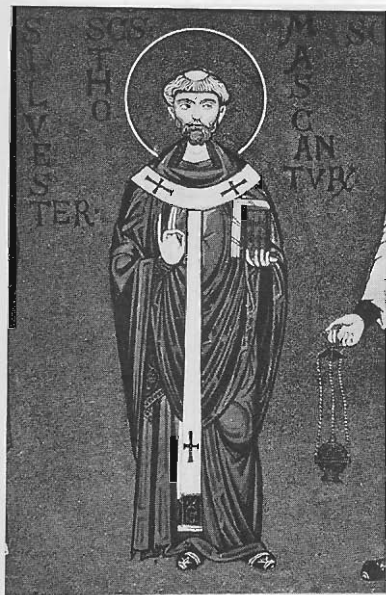
³ See Albert Way in *Archæological Journal*, Vol. XXVI (1869), pp. 84-9.

⁴ For this information I am indebted to Mr. Egerton Beck.

very simple one: he is shown in his mass vestments, with the pallium (the white band, ornamented with black crosses, which is a vestment specially pertaining to archbishops, and which usually is displayed hanging down from his neck so as to form the outline of a Y), without any indication of a mitre, holding a book in his left hand and imparting the benediction with his right. Of any emblem of his martyrdom there is no trace; and it would be impossible to expect from this naturally very stylized figure a portrait-like character, such as, for instance, to some extent does attach to the earliest thirteenth-century pictures of St. Francis of Assisi. As to St. Thomas Becket's exterior, a passage in one of the Icelandic *Thomas Sagas*, thought to reflect the evidence of a person who had seen the Archbishop, refers to him as "slim of growth and pale of hue, dark of hair, with a long nose and straightly featured face."¹

Closely similar to the Monreale figure is one, of but slightly later date, which once was to be seen among the wall paintings decorating the apse of the Oratory of St. Sylvester in the ancient church of St. Martin and St. Sylvester (San Martino ai Monti) on the Esquilin in Rome. All these frescoes are lost, but tolerably accurate seventeenth-century copies of them exist in a codex in

¹ Dean Stanley (*Memorials of Canterbury*, 7th ed., 1875, p. 196) has pointed out that the tall stature of St. Thomas, explicitly mentioned by William Fitzstephen, is borne witness to by the length of the vestments of St. Thomas preserved in the treasury of Sens Cathedral. "On the feast of 'St. Thomas' till very recently, they were worn for that one day by the officiating priest. The tallest priest was always selected—and, even then, it was necessary to pin them up." A note (fifteenth century) in the Lambeth MS. 306, fol. 203, on "The longitude of men folowyng," beginning with "Moyses, xiiijfote & viij ynches & di" mentions as seventh in the list of eight notable people "Seynt Thomas of Caunterbery, vij fote save a ynche" ("Three Fifteenth-Century Chronicles," ed. James Gairdner, *Camden Society*, New Series, Vol. XXVIII, 1880, p. 27).



1. MOSAIC, MONREALE
LATE TWELFTH CENTURY



2. FRESCO (DESTROYED), ROME,
SAN MARTINO AI MONTI
EARLY THIRTEENTH CENTURY



3. WALL-PAINTING, HAUXTON CHURCH
THIRTEENTH CENTURY