

ANCIENT HUMAN BONES FROM CANTERBURY
CATHEDRAL¹

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A REPORT has now been received by the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury Cathedral from the eminent scientists who, in 1949, examined the bones which were found in a stone coffin in the Crypt in 1888 and which have from time to time since that date been claimed as the bones of Archbishop Thomas Becket. The report finally disproves the theory that these bones are the relics of St. Thomas of Canterbury. It is a long, learned, technical document, but absorbing in its interest.

The examination of the bones was entrusted to Professor A. J. E. Cave, of the Department of Anatomy, St. Bartholomew's Hospital, and Mr. Jack Trevor, of the Faculty of Anthropology, Cambridge University. With them were present the Dean, the Canons Residentiary, the Chapter Agent, the Surveyor, and the Keeper of the Archives when the grave in the crypt was opened on 18th July, 1949. After the stone lid was raised it could be seen that the wooden coffin of 1888 had almost completely rotted away, exposing the skeleton.

A good deal of movement must have taken place within the coffin, for the skull had rolled over to one side, the bones for the most part were towards one end in no kind of order, a bottle deposited in 1888 (containing a memorandum of events and photographs of the remains) was broken and its contents destroyed by damp, and the bones themselves were extremely damp. That movement occurred is not to be wondered at, since during the war seventeen bombs fell within a short distance and the grave must many times have been a centre of intense vibration.

Each piece of bone, large or small, was taken out by the experts with the utmost care, placed in cotton wool, packed in small cardboard boxes, and finally the whole placed in a large box. For nearly two years the bones have been studied with infinite patience and skill. Each piece, however tiny and fragmentary, has been identified and labelled, and the remains have now been reinterred in a leaden sealed coffin.

¹ Reproduced from an article entitled "Scientists' Examination of Canterbury Bones" from *The Times* of 4th August, 1951, by kind permission of the author, and the proprietors of *The Times*. See also "Surgical Report on a Skeleton found in the Crypt of Canterbury Cathedral," *Arch. Cant.*, XVIII (1889), p. 257; "The Bones of Archbishop Becket," *Arch. Cant.*, XXI (1895), p. 73; and "The Cult of St. Thomas of Canterbury," *Arch. Cant.*, XLIV (1932), pp. 25-6.

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Though they are not the bones of St. Thomas, it is highly probable that they are those of an important person, but who that person may have been is outside the scope of this inquiry.

Archbishop Thomas Becket lived from 1118 to 1170. He was of tall stature, 52 years of age at the time of his death, and he was slain by a sword-cut detaching the top of his skull. The Canterbury bones are certainly compatible with a 12th-century date, but they belonged to a man no taller than 5 ft. 8 in. As to age, the evidence is equivocal; while consistent with an age of 52 years (as is also the pathological evidence) it is equally consistent with an age of 60 or more, and Professor Cave feels bound to regard the skull as that of a man older than 52. In general, the skeleton represents a robustly built adult male, of right-handed habitus, who had suffered a good deal from arthritis and a stiff back, but was otherwise healthy and possessed at death all his teeth save one. In the particular problem presented, however, the crucial evidence—the decisive feature—is offered by the cranial vault, which finally disproves the theory that these bones are the relics of St. Thomas.

“St. Thomas of Canterbury,” writes Professor Cave, “was slain through the crown of his skull being detached by a sword blow. . . . This *ante-mortem* detachment by a cutting instrument of a largish piece of the skull-top is crucial in the matter of identification of any cranium alleged to be that of St. Thomas. The authentic relic must show unmistakable evidence of instrumental breakage and detachment of the uppermost portion of the cranial vault. This is the criterion of authenticity. . . .”

“Now a large upper calvarial fragment does occur among the very numerous pieces of the . . . cranium. It would seem that in the 1888 examination this particular fragment was indeed interpreted as the ‘corona’ of St. Thomas’s skull. It was certainly so mounted upon the plaster block used in assembling the skull fragments as to appear isolated from the remainder of the vault by a bilateral gap. . . . It was, however, faultily placed, and, had a scientific repair of the vault been first undertaken, this alleged ‘corona’ would have been found to fit naturally into place and to have been seen as nothing more than it is, viz., a rather large piece of the skull-top, detached by *post-mortem* change from the rest of the skull. . . . The periphery of the fragment is not circular or oval in outline, but, on the contrary, emphatically jagged, angulated and irregular; i.e., its features are not those of an instrumentally detached piece of skull, but, contrariwise, and typically, those of a naturally broken-away piece of a buried cranium. The edges of the ‘pseudo-corona’ also proclaim its true nature: they manifest nowhere any evidence of contact with a cutting instrument—or, indeed, any *ante-mortem* trauma whatsoever.”

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In sum, the "pseudo-corona" was not instrumentally detached *in vivo* and cannot therefore be the "corona" of St. Thomas.

Finally, the absence of so many of the smaller bones of hands and feet and elsewhere, the nature of so many of the fractures in the remaining bones, the obtrusive spade marks in pelvis, femur, patella, and tibia, the admixture of extraneous oddments (organic and inorganic) with the skeleton render it certain that the remains were first buried in earth and at a later date were exhumed with greater or less care and skill for burial in the Portland stone coffin in the Crypt. The burial was that of an intact corpse and not the hurried inhumation of bones previously preserved as relics, for the incidence of the spade-cuts shows the bones to have occupied their proper anatomical positions.

The story of the murder of Archbishop Becket in 1170 is related in many contemporary chronicles, and it is certain that the cause of death was the severance of a large section of the crown of the skull—the "corona." The 16th-century drawing of the tomb of Becket in the Cottonian manuscripts in the British Museum shows the saint's bones; the top of the skull is detached, while the *foramen magnum* in the floor of the skull can be seen clearly through the wound.

It is to be regretted that no adequate scientific examination of the bones discovered in 1888 was made before they were placed in a new coffin of wood and reinterred in the original Portland stone coffin. A report by Mr. Pugin Thornton, author of *Phrenology, or Heads and What They Tell Us*, appeared in *Archaeologia Cantiana* and was also published as a pamphlet entitled *Becket's Bones*. Even the layman can detect that this investigation was not thoroughly competent; nor should we be impressed to-day by deductions as to the character of the dead man based on "phrenological science." The skull was in pieces when found, and in putting it together on a plaster mould Mr. Thornton claimed to discover a distinctive wound of 6 to 7 in. in length along the left side of the cranium. True, this wound did not precisely tally with the accepted nature of the fatal blow, but Mr. Thornton dwelt on the variations in the different chronicles and decided "we are unable to satisfy ourselves that the crown of his head was cut off."

Thereafter, rumour was current in Canterbury that Becket's bones did indeed lie in the Crypt, and in the early part of this century Archbishop Davidson requested Canon A. J. Mason to bring together all the relevant facts. This task Dr. Mason accomplished and in 1920 published his book *What Became of the Bones of St. Thomas?* But he was compelled to rely on Mr. Thornton's report, citations from which contrast ill with the scholarly precision of his own work. On the last page he wrote that the facts "seem to point to the conclusion that the bones in question are those of the great Archbishop," though

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he adds the suggestion that, if they are not, they may be those of St. Alphege, whose head was cloven by a Danish axe.

Since the time of Dr. Mason's inquiry opinion had almost hardened into acceptance of identity of these remains with St. Thomas. The present Dean and Chapter, however, were not happy in this ascription, which might well have become, by constant repetition, avowed as fact. The expert examination of the bones by eminent scientists on which they decided has shown that while the putative historic age, the sex, the pathology, and (doubtfully) the individual age of the Crypt skeleton are compatible with its being the remains of St. Thomas, the stature and, crucially, the absence of *ante-mortem* cranial injury constitute over-riding evidence against this interpretation.