



# Thomas Becket

A brief biography of England's greatest medieval saint

## Thomas Becket's biography<sup>1</sup>



Thomas Becket icon in Monreale

12th century

Detail of the Apse Mosaic, Cathedral of Monreale, Sicily

Thomas Becket was the son of a wealthy London merchant and was born in that city around 1120. Despite this, his first language was French. As the kings and nobles in the twelfth century all spoke French, this would prove very useful in his future career. Nevertheless, having been born in London it is entirely likely he spoke English too, therefore making him a popular figure among the people when he later gained high office in the Church. During his childhood Thomas was educated at a religious house, a London school, and later in Paris. This meant that he learned the ways of the nobility and court very quickly. As his family was richer than most in London at the time, it was easier for his father to get son a position as a clerk in the household of the archbishop of Canterbury, who at this time was called Theobald.

During his time in Archbishop Theobald's household, Becket made many friends in the higher ranks of society. Theobald sought to help him by letting him go to Europe to study law

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<sup>1</sup> All research here used from: Frank Barlow, 'Becket, Thomas [St Thomas of Canterbury, Thomas of London], (1120?-1170)', in *ODNB*, Online Version, (Sept. 2004), available via: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/27201>, accessed 05/04/2021.

and later by giving him the position of archdeacon of Canterbury, which was an important job that brought lands and other income. He also met Matilda's son Henry, during his time in Theobald's household, who was likely still Duke Henry having not yet become king. When Henry became king of England in 1154, he appointed Becket as his chancellor. The chancellor was one of the most important people in the country, often acting on behalf of the king in financial and political affairs. Henry and Becket became good friends, Becket frequently accompanying the king on his travels around England and France.

When Archbishop Theobald died in 1161 there was only one man, according to Henry, who was good enough to take the job. The king argued that Becket should be the next archbishop due to his good education and knowledge of Church affairs, which he had learned in Theobald's household and as archdeacon. The Church, especially the monks of Canterbury, did not like this decision as Becket had spent most of his time as a politician rather than as a churchman. In the end, though, Becket was elected archbishop. Senior churchmen were right to be worried because Henry had a specific motive for promoting his friend to the highest Church position in England. Henry II, like other kings before him, wanted to reduce the Church's power so that he had much greater control over everything in his kingdom, including the Church itself. By placing one of his best friends in this position, Henry hoped that Becket would help him, but as the king soon discovered, this was not to be.

When Becket officially became archbishop in 1162, he decided to cast any doubts aside and prove to everyone that he was the right man for the job. He thrust himself into the role, determined to fight for the rights of the Church. Obviously, this meant that Henry's plan had failed. Their friendship began to splinter, and fierce arguments erupted between the two men. Henry refused to let Becket attend meetings with the Pope and other leading European churchmen, and likewise Becket refused to carry out any wishes the king asked of him. Some of these arguments were so fierce that Becket eventually went into exile out of fear for his life and office. Eventually a settlement was reached and Becket returned to England in 1170, after being absent for many years. Nevertheless, the two friends still continued to argue. Becket went against King Henry's wishes once again, causing Henry to become very angry. In a rage, the king is said to have exclaimed 'who will rid me of this troublesome priest?'

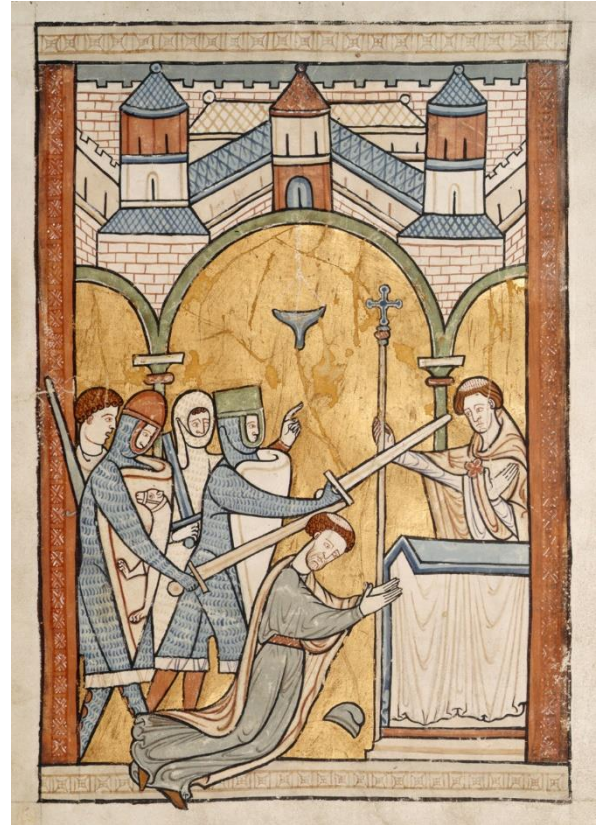
At Henry's court in France, four knights wanted to impress the king and show Becket that he could not treat the king in this manner. The four knights crossed the Channel and rode to Canterbury to confront the archbishop. They argued with Becket at his palace and then followed him into the cathedral where the evening service was taking place. The knights were so angry they killed him, one struck him so hard that the tip of his sword broke on the stone steps after cutting off the top of Becket's head. After the knights had left, the monks came and took Becket's body into the crypt, then collected his blood from the floor. As we shall see in the rest of the pack, Becket's blood played a very important role in the miracles featured in the stained-glass windows.

News of Becket's death spread throughout Europe. The shockwaves of such a horrifying event hit every corner of the medieval world, and soon enough Becket's name was on everyone's lips. Upset with Henry II, European leaders openly criticised the king, and the Church was close to excommunicating him. However, Becket was already attracting plenty of praise for his actions before his death. Pilgrims living near Canterbury flocked to the cathedral in the search of divine intervention and miracles. The monks of the cathedral began using the blood they had collected

following his death as medicine for those pilgrims seeking a miracle. In 1173, Becket officially became a saint. The Pope canonised Thomas as St Thomas of Canterbury. In the centuries following his brutal murder, Becket's tomb became one of the most visited shrines in medieval Europe. His cult became one of the largest in Europe, and it was probably the largest in England. It is even suggested that St Thomas was the patron saint of England before St George became the national saint.

To this day, visitors to Canterbury are interested in the story of Becket. The area where he was killed became known as the martyrdom and is still one of the most popular sites to visit inside the cathedral. Although the shrine was destroyed by Henry VIII in the Dissolution of the monasteries in the late 1530s, the position of the shrine can still be seen in the Trinity Chapel. On the floor where the shrine once stood, there are grooves where the pilgrims used to kneel in prayer before his shrine. A solitary candle now marks the location of Becket's shrine, permanently burning to ensure St Thomas's legacy lives on forever.

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Becket enthroned as Archbishop (Alabaster, V&A)

Becket returning from exile (ditto)

Becket's murder (Harley MS 5102, f. 32) The earliest known portrayal of Thomas Becket's murder in Canterbury Cathedral.