

The Murder of Thomas Becket, 1170

Murder on the altar's steps

A sword's crushing blow extinguished the life of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, on a cold December evening as he struggled on the steps of his altar. The brutal event sent a tremor through Medieval Europe. Public opinion of the time and subsequent history have laid the blame for the murder at the feet of Becket's former close personal friend, King Henry II.

Becket was born in 1118, in Normandy the son of an English merchant. His family was well off, his father a former Sheriff of London. Becket benefited from his family's status first by being sent to Paris for his education and from there to England where he joined the household of Theobald, the then Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket's administrative skills, his charm, intelligence and diplomacy propelled him forward. The archbishop sent him to Paris to study law and upon his return to England made him Archdeacon of Canterbury.

Becket's big break came in 1154, when Theobald introduced him to the newly crowned King, Henry II. The two hit it off immediately, their similar personal chemistries forming a strong bond between them. Henry named Becket his Chancellor. Archbishop Theobald died in 1161, and Henry immediately saw the opportunity to increase his influence over the Church by naming his loyal advisor to the highest ecclesiastical post in the land. Henry petitioned the Pope who agreed. There was only one slight hindrance. Becket, busy at court, had never been ordained. No problem, Becket was first invested as a priest. The next day he was ordained a Bishop, and that afternoon, June 2, 1162, made Archbishop of Canterbury.

If King Henry believed that by having "his man" in the top post of the Church, he could easily impose his will upon this powerful religious institution, he was sadly mistaken. Becket's allegiance shifted from the court to the Church inspiring him to take a stand against his king. In those days, the Church reserved the right to try felonious clerics in their own religious courts of justice and not those of the crown. Henry was determined to increase control of his realm by eliminating this custom. In 1163, a Canon accused of murder was acquitted by a church court. The public outcry demanded justice and the Canon was brought before a court of the king. Becket's protest halted this attempt but the action spurred King Henry to change the laws to extend his courts' jurisdiction over the clergy. Becket vacillated in his support of the king, finally refusing to agree to changes in the

King Henry II was the father of [Richard-the-Lionhearted](#) and of King John of *Magna Carta* fame.

King Henry VIII destroyed the shrine dedicated to Thomas Becket at Canterbury.

law. His stand prompted a royal summons to Henry's court at Northampton and the king's demand to know what Becket had done with the large sums of money that had passed through his hands as Chancellor.

**"Who will rid
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Seeing the writing on the wall, Becket fled to France where he remained in exile for six years. The two former friends appeared to resolve their dispute in 1170 when King Henry and Becket met in Normandy. On November 30, Becket crossed the Channel returning to his post at Canterbury. Earlier, while in France, Becket had excommunicated the Bishops of London and Salisbury for their support of the king. Now, Becket remained steadfast in his refusal to absolve the bishops. This news threw King Henry (still in France) into a rage in which he was purported to shout: "What sluggards, what cowards have I brought up in my court, who care nothing for their allegiance to their lord. Who will rid me of this meddlesome priest."

The king's exact words have been lost to history but his outrage inspired four knights to sail to England to rid the realm of this annoying prelate. They arrived at Canterbury during the afternoon of December 29 and immediately searched for the Archbishop. Becket fled to the Cathedral where a service was in progress. The knights found him at the altar, drew their swords and began hacking at their victim finally splitting his skull.

The death of Becket unnerved the king. The knights who did the deed to curry the king's favor, fell into disgrace. Several miracles were said to occur at the tomb of the martyr and he was soon canonized. Hordes of pilgrims transformed Canterbury Cathedral into a shrine. Four years later, in an act of penance, the king donned a sack-cloth walking barefoot through the streets of Canterbury while eighty monks flogged him with branches. Henry capped his atonement by spending the night in the martyr's crypt. St. Thomas continued as a popular cultist figure for the remainder of the Middle Ages.

Observations of a Monk

Edward Grim, a monk, observed the attack from the safety of a hiding place near the altar. He wrote his account some time after the event. Acceptance of his description must be qualified by the influence that Becket's sainthood had on Grim's perspective. However, the fundamentals of his narrative are no doubt true. We pick up the story after the knights have stormed into the cathedral.

"The murderers followed him; 'Absolve', they cried, 'and restore to communion those whom you have excommunicated, and restore their powers to those whom you have suspended.'

"He answered, 'There has been no satisfaction, and I will not absolve them.'

'Then you shall die,' they cried, 'and receive what you deserve.'

'I am ready,' he replied, 'to die for my Lord, that in my blood the Church may obtain liberty and peace. But in the name of Almighty God, I forbid you to hurt my people whether clerk or lay.'

"Then they lay sacrilegious hands on him, pulling and dragging him that they may kill him outside the church, or carry him away a prisoner, as they afterwards confessed. But when he could not be forced away from the pillar, one of them pressed on him and clung to him more closely. Him he pushed off calling him 'pander', and saying, 'Touch me not, Reginald; you owe me fealty and subjection; you and your accomplices act like madmen.'

"The knight, fired with a terrible rage at this severe repulse, waved his sword over the sacred head. 'No faith', he cried, 'nor subjection do I owe you against my fealty to my lord the King.'

"Then the unconquered martyr seeing the hour at hand which should put an end to this miserable life and give him straightway the crown of immortality promised by the Lord, inclined his neck as one who prays and joining his hands he lifted them up, and commended his cause and that of the Church to God, to St. Mary, and to the blessed martyr Denys. Scarce had he said the words than the wicked knight, fearing lest he should be rescued by the people and escape alive, leapt upon him suddenly and wounded this lamb who was sacrificed to God on the head, cutting off the top of the crown which the sacred unction of the chrism had dedicated to God; and by the same blow he wounded the arm of him who tells this. For he, when the others, both monks and clerks, fled, stuck close to the sainted Archbishop and held him in his arms till the one he interposed was almost severed.

"Then he received a second blow on the head but still stood firm. At the third blow he fell on his knees and elbows, offering himself a living victim, and saying in a low voice, 'For the Name of Jesus and the protection of the Church I am ready to embrace death.'

"Then the third knight inflicted a terrible wound as he lay, by which the sword was broken against the pavement, and the crown which was large was separated from the head. The fourth knight prevented any from interfering so that the others might freely perpetrate the murder.

"As to the fifth, no knight but that clerk who had entered with the knights, that a

**"Let us away
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no more."** fifth blow might not be wanting to the martyr who was in other things like to Christ, he put his foot on the neck of the holy priest and precious martyr, and, horrible to say, scattered his brain and blood over the pavement, calling out to the others, 'Let us away, knights; he will rise no more.'

References:

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