

THE LIVES OF THOMAS BECKET



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SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

Astonishingly, and uniquely for any medieval subject, no fewer than fourteen Lives of Thomas Becket were produced within twenty years of his death. One, by a woman, seems now, alas, definitively lost. The rest, including as much of another now-lost Life as has survived incorporated in a fourteenth-century Icelandic saga, are the subject-matter of Michael Staunton's book in the Manchester Medieval Sources series. Given Becket's historical interest, and hence the Lives' importance as evidence of a life that has often baffled medieval as well as modern commentators, the lack of modern translations of most of these texts has long been regretted. Michael Staunton's book fills the gap admirably. With lucid translations, he supplies an introduction and commentary that will make these works, not easy, for they are, as he rightly insists, 'sophisticated and complex', but accessible to thoughtful and attentive readers. Appropriately, since Becket caused so much contention in life, this book also contains some contemporary critical views of Becket. Such inclusivity is timely: modern judgements on Becket are – at last – ceasing to be polarised between hagiography and exposé. Michael Staunton provides the wherewithal to stimulate and support new readings and richer understandings of the man and his context: a twelfth century that, for good as well as ill, contributed a very great deal to the making of Europe.

Janet L. Nelson
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PREFACE

The story of Thomas Becket is one of the best-known in English history, but few have read it in the words of those who knew him best. It is not that material is lacking – rather, that the collection of twelfth-century Lives and letters is vast (almost two million words in total), and very little of it has been translated. It is hoped that this book will allow students and scholars an accessible form in which to read what Thomas's intimates, admirers and critics had to say about his life and death, his personality and character, and his world.

The selection of material was by no means easy, but it was made less difficult by the nature of the Lives. They tend to begin at the beginning of Thomas's life and proceed in a quite consistent manner up to his death and its aftermath. They devote most attention to the seven and a half years when Thomas was archbishop, and particular attention to his last days, and I have echoed this emphasis. Some biographers, Edward Grim or 'Roger of Pontigny' for instance, provide very good broad narratives, but for the most important and dramatic events I have usually used the more detailed accounts of eyewitnesses such as William Fitzstephen or Herbert of Bosham. My main intention has been to tell the story, but I have also included more reflective extracts and material which illustrates features of contemporary life. It is also hoped that this collection will provide an insight into the Lives themselves. I have included all the main biographers, but the proportion included of each writer gives a general reflection of their importance as historical and literary works as I saw it.

The most difficult decision concerned the inclusion of letters. I originally intended to intersperse extracts from the Lives with contemporary correspondence but eventually decided against it. I feared not only that the inclusion of correspondence would have pushed the word count far beyond the desired limit, but also that it might obscure the nature and meaning of the sources. The Thomas that correspondents wrote of in the 1160s is an entirely different creature to the subject of the posthumous Lives: while one was a flawed and embattled archbishop, the other was a saint whose works had been vindicated. Still, considering that the inclusion of the Lives alone would give an unduly biased viewpoint, I tried to provide balance with a separate section entitled 'Dissenting Voices'.

I have provided quite a lot of introductory commentary. The story and the issues often require explanation and interpretation, and it is sometimes necessary to fill in the gaps left by the biographers. It sometimes seems that everything that needs to be said about Thomas has been said, but this is not so. It is hoped that by reading about him in the words of his biographers, others will be encouraged to investigate further the unresolved features of his life.

All translations are my own, except for those of Garnier's Life which I took from Janet Shirley's *Garnier's Becket*, and the Icelandic Saga which was translated by Haki Antonson. I am very grateful to both of them.

Many people helped in the production of this book. My first thanks are to Jennifer O'Reilly of University College Cork who introduced me to the subject and has given me support ever since. I am also very grateful to those who helped me in my research into the subject while at Cambridge, in particular Gillian Evans and Christopher Brooke. This book was written in the highly supportive atmosphere of the Department of Mediaeval History, St Andrews, and I am indebted to far too many people to mention. Chris Given-Wilson, Brian Briggs, and Philip Burton of the Classics Department very kindly looked over some difficult passages, though it must be said that any mistakes are my own. Kris Towson's technical expertise was essential to the production of the maps, and Haki Antonson was of invaluable assistance, not only for providing the translation from Icelandic and reading over drafts, but also for numerous discussions of the material. The staff of Manchester University Press have been encouraging, sympathetic and efficient throughout. Finally I would like to thank those who have provided the longest and most valuable support in the writing of this book, my family and Oonagh Smyth.

ABBREVIATIONS

Barlow F. Barlow, *Thomas Becket* (London, 1986).

Councils and Synods *Councils and Synods With Other Documents Relating to the English Church, 1 AD 871–1204*, Part 2, 1066–1204 (Oxford, 1981), eds D. Whitelock, M. Brett, and C. N. L. Brooke.

Garnier *Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence*, ed. E. Walberg (Lund, 1922).

CTB *The Correspondence of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1162–70* (Oxford, 2000), ed. A. Duggan.

LCGF *The Letters and Charters of Gilbert Foliot* (Cambridge, 1967), eds A. Morey and C. N. L. Brooke.

LJS *The Letters of John of Salisbury*, vol. II (Oxford, 1979), eds W. J. Millor and C. N. L. Brooke.

Morey and Brooke A. Morey and C. N. L. Brooke, *Gilbert Foliot and his Letters* (Cambridge, 1965).

MTB *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury*, eds J. C. Robertson and J. B. Sheppard (RS, London, 1875–85).

Saga *Thómas Saga Erkebyskups*, ed. E. Magnusson (RS, London, 1875–83).

Smalley B. Smalley, *The Becket Conflict and the Schools* (Oxford, 1973).

Warren W. L. Warren, *Henry II* (London, 1973).



England: places mentioned in the text



Northern France: places mentioned in the text

INTRODUCTION

Thomas of Canterbury was no ordinary saint, and on that his admirers and critics can agree. In the wake of his murder on 29 December 1170 he was hailed by many as the greatest saint of his age, one who emulated the patriarchs of the early church, and even Christ. But even as thousands testified to his miraculous powers and visited his tomb, and his memory was honoured by his own church, by the pope and by his enemies during life, doubts remained. It was not long since he had been widely regarded as an arrogant troublemaker whose personal inadequacies had damaged not only the interests of the crown, but those of the Church which he claimed to espouse. It seemed to some then, and many since, that his glory had been achieved solely by virtue of his death, not his life. Both admirers and critics have approached his life through the prism of his death, whether as confirmation of its greatness, or a distraction from its flaws. But Thomas's life would still have been remarkable, even without its violent end. This was the son of a London merchant, who had risen first to one of the highest administrative positions in the land, and then to its highest ecclesiastical office. His rift with his former friend the king, and the progress of the dispute which led to public confrontation and prolonged exile, was keenly followed all over the Christian world. As the shock of his murder reverberated around Europe, many of those touched by these events began to write their accounts of what they regarded as the most important episode of their age. They sought to tell the story, not only of Thomas's glorious death but also of his life, and to show that one was the true fulfilment of the other.

We probably know more about Thomas's life than that of any other Englishman of the middle ages. The twelfth-century Latin Lives comprise four weighty volumes of the Rolls Series and the letter collection a further three, and that is before we take into account the French verse Lives, the Icelandic Saga and the numerous other notices in contemporary histories. These works provide eyewitness testimony to his character, conversation and way of life and a very detailed account of the turbulent years as archbishop from 1163 to 1170. Like that of Abelard and Heloise, or Richard III, Thomas's story is dramatic and extraordinary in itself and at the same time illustrative of its time and place. There are few texts in which one can find such

precise and evocative descriptions of, for example, high and low-level politics in the secular and ecclesiastical worlds, or the development of a saintly cult. But while the Lives are superior historical records, they are more than that. They are works of history and biography, but also of hagiography. They are partisan accounts, written by some of the most learned people of their time, many of whom were steeped in knowledge of theology and canon law. They are more sophisticated and complex works than many have imagined, and as such they present both challenges and opportunities to the historian.

The dispute

At the centre of the dispute is the personality of Thomas himself. It has often been said that Thomas's personality and character are elusive, but perhaps it is more accurate to say that they are complex and sometimes contradictory. After all, there is general agreement that he was highly capable, and could inspire others, and that he was also rash and often arrogant. Against him is Henry II, a young and energetic king supposedly led astray by uncontrollable temper and poor counsel. Much of the sharpness of the dispute derives from the volatile relationship between these two men, former friends, whose forcefulness and obstinacy pushed them further apart once the rift had emerged. But that was not the only personality clash to define the dispute. Archbishop Roger of York and Bishops Hilary of Chichester and Gilbert of London make vivid appearances in the Lives as fomenters of envy towards the bishop and discord towards the Church, and the conflict was brought to its conclusion by laymen who had long harboured grudges against the archbishop. Prominent roles were also played by King Louis VII of France and Pope Alexander III, who often had to walk a tightrope between Thomas and Henry. But if we follow those biographers who knew him best, the greatest personal conflict was within Thomas himself as he struggled to adapt himself to his changing roles and the different challenges which he faced at every step, right up to his death.

The personalities involved gave the dispute its character, but there were always serious underlying issues present. They derived from the conflicting duties and ambitions of an archbishop of Canterbury and an English king in the mid-to-late twelfth century. Thomas and his biographers claimed that he was advancing the cause of the Church, but this was a multifaceted phenomenon with overlapping and some-

times conflicting components. It was the archbishop's duty to defend and advance the fortunes of his see, the English Church, and the Church at large.

One ought not to overlook the importance of Canterbury rights to the Becket dispute. The earliest recorded disputes in which Thomas was involved as archbishop relate to his attempts to retrieve Canterbury properties; it was the usurpation of Canterbury's right to crown the young king that led first to the settlement at Fréteval and the excommunication and suspension of the bishops involved; this in turn led to their complaint to the king, which prompted Thomas's murder by men under the overall command of those who had taken Canterbury lands during the archbishop's exile.

The crisis of 1163-64 was based around the protection of the liberty of the English Church. Henry's customs were principally an attempt to reassert the crown's control over jurisdiction which had lapsed since the reign of his grandfather, Henry I, mainly because of the laxity of royal control during the reign of Stephen, and the burgeoning influence of papal jurisdiction which had affected all of Europe. The most important specific issues were those of 'criminous clerks' – men in religious orders who had committed a serious felony whom Henry believed had been treated too leniently by Church courts – and appeals to the pope. Whether Thomas's opposition was legally grounded is a matter for debate, but it was certainly his duty as the leader of the English Church to defend the rights he had inherited from his predecessors in that office, and he was supported, at least at first, by the majority of the English clergy. However, it was equally Henry's duty to protect and advance the privileges which his royal ancestors had possessed.

But by the late twelfth century such matters did not involve the English clergy alone. The second half of the previous century had seen, with 'the Investiture Contest' between Pope Gregory VII and Emperor Henry IV, the first great clash between ecclesiastical and secular power, and even had the dispute between Thomas and Henry remained a domestic affair, the concepts of priestly and royal power were bound to play a part. Was the Becket dispute, then, a clash of powers, or even ideologies? Undoubtedly the clash of personalities and the individual disputes exposed fault-lines which had already been there between a confident post-Gregorian Church and an English monarchy that was intent on exploiting its rights to the full. There is some discussion in the Lives and the letters of the theoretical relationship between spiritual and secular power, but it may seem surprising that

there is not more. Thomas's principal critics during his life came from within the Church and were, to put it simply, on the same side, but they also recognised the importance of the Church's relationship with the crown. Gilbert Foliot and others did not criticise Thomas for defending the Church: rather, they claimed that through his recklessness and his personal inadequacies he had endangered it. Their counsel was to retreat from his path of outright opposition to the king, not because the king ought to be obeyed before the Church, but because there was an appropriate time for opposition and for co-operation. Thomas, on the other hand, argued that the time was at hand to follow in the footsteps of the righteous defenders of the Church, and speak out against sinners.

This is perhaps the most fundamental reason why those involved in the dispute were so difficult to reconcile: they had quite different notions of the nature of the dispute itself. Gilbert Foliot is reported as saying that the dispute was a trivial and unimportant one which might have been easily settled had a restrained approach been taken. Between this position and the view that the issues came down to a battle between good and evil, in which its participants followed in the footsteps of Old Testament prophets and tyrants, Christ and the pharisees, the saints and the Church's persecutors, there could be no middle ground.

The Lives

What is most striking about the Lives of St Thomas is that there are so many of them, and that they were written so quickly. This is a testimony to the strength of the cult, and the fascination that Thomas's story held. It is also of great benefit to the historian.

Three of those who knew Thomas best wrote posthumous biographies, his clerks John of Salisbury, William Fitzstephen and Herbert of Bosham. Though John's *Life* is short and often superficial, the other two are highly informative works which are of great value as independent historical records. Other writers had more limited contact with their subject: William of Canterbury and Benedict of Peterborough were monks of Christ Church, Canterbury, witnesses to his martyrdom and custodians of his shrine; 'Roger of Pontigny', if we accept his identity as a monk of that Cistercian house,¹ knew Thomas

¹ See below, pp. 9–10.

during his exile; Edward Grim did not meet Thomas until December 1170, but his attempt to protect Thomas from his murderers' blows gained him a place in history. Though the other biographers had no personal knowledge of Thomas,² they had easy access to information about him. All of the biographers included here wrote within twenty years of Thomas's death, and most within ten.³ They were familiar with what has become known as 'Canterbury legend': the stories which grew up around Thomas after his death, based on witness testimony. Most also had access to the relevant correspondence, and Garnier, at least, undertook investigative journalism, interviewing witnesses including Thomas's sister. In addition, many of the writers borrowed from each other.

Although these writers can be as guilty of exaggeration and biased interpretation as any other contemporary hagiographers, in terms of historical detail their accounts are generally believable, with little deliberate distortion of events and a strong degree of precision. This is not surprising: these were important events, fresh in their minds, and familiar to many of their readers. While there is occasional disagreement about dates, places and sequence, it is not difficult to construct an accurate picture of the events of 1162–70, at least, from the Lives and the letters. The Lives give us a remarkable insight into Thomas's everyday life as chancellor and archbishop. They also give us comprehensive narratives of the most important public occasions in which Thomas was involved: the councils of Westminster and Northampton, the meeting with the pope at Sens, the peace negotiations at Montmirail and Montmartre, and the murder (although information on the Council of Clarendon and the excommunications at Vézelay is regrettably scarce).

The Lives, then, provide a great deal of what the modern historian wants to know. However, it is important to remember that this was not the writers' principal intention. Motives for writing tend to be mixed, and are impossible to pin down precisely, but one may wonder why so many people wanted to write about Thomas. After all, his cult had gained popular and official recognition in a remarkably short time, before most of the Lives were even written, thereby removing one of the most common purposes of hagiography: the establishment

² If we discount the cubious claims of the Lambeth Anonymus and Garnier's sighting of him as chancellor.

³ The Icelandic Saga is an exception, but this was based on the lost Life by Robert of Cricklade, written in 1173–74.

of the subject's sanctity. One of the driving forces was obviously the widespread interest in the subject, affording a ready audience. But another powerful motive remained: to explain Thomas's controversial life. That is the very title of Alan of Tewkesbury's work – the *Explanatio* – and Thomas's life took some explaining. How could one reconcile the image of the glorious martyr with the apparently proud and vain chancellor who was made archbishop through the pressure of secular power, and in that role abandoned the cause of ecclesiastical liberty by submitting to the king's customs, abandoned his flock by fleeing to the continent, and caused havoc for his king and his church while in exile?

The biographers looked to Christian tradition. This was not difficult for them: all were churchmen – either clerks or monks – some were very learned in theology, others in canon law. As one of Thomas's supporters is reported as saying to the French king when he suggested that Thomas should have remembered the reading 'Be ye angry and sin not', 'Perhaps he would have remembered this verse if he had heard it as often as we have in the canonical hours'.⁴ Christian tradition, in the form of the bible, theology, hagiography, history and canon law, provided a range of examples which could be applied to Thomas: the holy man who lived in the public eye but hid his inner sanctity; the convert who by God's grace was inspired to put off the old man and put on the new; the sinner who rose up more strongly after a fall; the righteous exile who fled in the body, but advanced, as a pilgrim, in the spirit; the defender of Christ and the Church who spoke with authority to princes and great men; the righteous man who stood alone against evil. For the biographers, the manner of Thomas's death was not an aberration which could be dissociated from the manner of his death: it was – and this is the word they often use to describe it – the *consummation* of his conversion, his pilgrimage and his struggle.

The biographers

Thomas's biographers share much. They were writing around the same time, they all benefit from Canterbury tradition, and many borrow from each other, so it is not surprising that they tend to similarity in structure and in detail. Nevertheless, these are individual works, each

⁴ See below, p. 127.

with its own character. There is some debate about the sequence in which they are written, but it is possible to place them in broad chronological order.⁵

Edward Grim

Though it is neither the most informative nor the most sophisticated of the Lives, Edward Grim's is one of the most important. A clerk from Cambridgeshire, he happened to be in Canterbury Cathedral to witness Thomas's murder. His heroic attempt to shield the archbishop from the knights' blows earned him a place in the saint's legend, and in many visual representations of the martyrdom. Written very early, 1171–72, it was very influential, and formed the basis of the Lives by Garnier and 'Roger of Pontigny'. The structure of Grim's Life is mirrored by many of the others: after a brief and hagiographical account of Thomas's years before he became archbishop it is more detailed from 1162 onwards, and provides a good description of the early dispute; the section on Thomas's exile is covered much less fully, but his return to England, his murder and posthumous acclaim receive far more attention. He is often uncertain on detail, placing the young king's coronation four years too early, for example, but his account of the murder is probably the best. [1, 11, 22, 30, 35, 51, 58]

John of Salisbury

As a close ally of Thomas and one of the foremost intellectuals of his era, John was ideally suited to write a Life of Thomas. The author of, among other works, the *Policraticus* and a *Life of St Anselm*, he served as a clerk in the papal court, as well as in the courts of Archbishops Theobald and Thomas of Canterbury. He became archbishop of Chartres in 1176 and died in 1180. A prolific letter-writer, he played an important role in the Becket dispute. His work is in fact a disappointment, consisting of an expanded version of a letter he wrote in the immediate aftermath of the murder.⁶ The view that John's Life was written in 1173–76 and was almost entirely derivative has recently been challenged,⁷ but whatever its date, John's main contribution to the hagiography is his letters, not only the one which formed the basis of his Life, but the others which contained arguments on Thomas's

⁵ On the relation between the Lives and their dates, see E. Walberg, *La tradition hagiographique de S Thomas Becket avant la fin du XIIe siècle* (1929), or for a more accessible summary, Barlow, pp. 1–9.

⁶ *LJS* no. 305, pp. 724–39.

⁷ Barlow, p. 4.

behalf which were later taken up by others. [5, 14]

'The Lambeth Anonymous' (Anonymous II)

One of the more curious Lives of Thomas is found in one manuscript in Lambeth Palace Library. Although the author claims to be an eyewitness in the preface, the claim is not repeated, and the Life does not suggest any familiarity with the events. Though thin on detail, the Life shows a strong grasp of the issues, and in particular their place in the canon law tradition, and it is most similar to the reflective works of William of Canterbury and Herbert of Bosham. This Life is also notable for its unusual tendency to allow criticism of Thomas. It was written 1172–73. [10, 55]

Benedict of Peterborough

Benedict was a monk of Christ Church, Canterbury who was present at the murder. He became prior of Canterbury in 1175, abbot of Peterborough in 1177, and died in 1193. He was the first custodian of Thomas's shrine, and his interviews with pilgrims formed the basis of his book of miracles. His *Passio* of Thomas, written 1173–74, which exists in fragmentary form, is valuable for its eyewitness account of the murder, and description of its aftermath. [52, 54]

William of Canterbury

William became a monk of Canterbury during Thomas's exile, and was ordained as deacon by the archbishop in December 1170. From June 1172 he edited existing miracles and added to them, and his collection was presented to the king in 1174. His Life, which prefaces the miracles, is the closest we have to an official Canterbury Life. Written 1173–74, it is a reflective work, learned, complex and at times pretentious. It reveals access to documentary evidence and a knowledge of canon law. His criticism of King Henry's policy in Ireland has led some to believe that William was of Irish origin. [25, 34, 43, 47, 54]

William Fitzstephen

Along with that of Herbert of Bosham, William Fitzstephen's Life is the most valuable as a work of history and a work of literature. He served as a clerk to both Thomas and Henry, and was present during many of the most dramatic moments in Thomas's life, including his murder. He had a particular interest in London affairs, as illustrated by the famous description of London which opens his book, and he made use of Gilbert Foliot's letter collection. An elegant and erudite

writer, he provides a great degree of independent testimony, often with acute eyewitness detail. His account of the Council of Northampton, for example, combines great narrative and rhetorical skill. His description of Thomas's life as chancellor is invaluable, as are many of his reports of affairs in England during the exile. He wrote in 1173–74, by which time he had returned to the service of the king, thereby perhaps explaining the curious absence of any reference to William by the other biographers. His *Life* survived in two forms: one includes thirty-eight additional passages, many of which reflect badly on the king. [4, 7, 8, 17, 23, 28, 32, 39, 42, 45, 48, 50, 53]

Garnier of Pont-Sainte-Maxence

Garnier's work, in French verse, owes much to Edward Grim but adds some of his own detail and interpretation. Although he never met Thomas, he engaged in extensive research in the Canterbury area after the martyrdom, and interviewed, among others, Thomas's sister. He tells us that an early, inferior, version of the *Life* was stolen by scribes, but that his revision, completed by late 1174, is superior to all other accounts of Thomas's life. Intriguingly, he refers to an unidentified *Life* of Thomas written by a woman.⁸ [6, 46]

Alan of Tewkesbury

Alan was an Englishman who returned to Canterbury in 1174 after a time as a canon at Benevento. He became prior of Canterbury in 1179, and abbot of Tewkesbury in 1188. He is best known for his work in editing the Becket correspondence, completed in 1176, but less attention has been paid to his *Explanatio*, a supplement to John of Salisbury's *Life* with which he prefaced the letter collection. It is especially notable for the description of the conference with the pope at Sens, and while much of the rest is rather unconvincing, it gives us an important insight into which aspects of Thomas's life still required explanation half a decade after his death. [27, 38]

'Roger of Pontigny' (Anonymous I)

Though also highly derivative from Edward Grim, this work, written 1176–77, is superior to its model, especially in terms of the clarity of the narrative. This is especially noticeable in the accounts of the dispute as it emerged in 1163 and early 1164. The author claims to have served Thomas as a clerk at Pontigny, and his identity has been linked to that of a monk called Roger who is known to have served

⁸ Garnier 141 ff.

Thomas during the archbishop's stay at that Cistercian house. Some have cast doubt on this identification, pointing to the author's meagre account of Thomas's stay at Pontigny. A possible explanation is the fact that here, as elsewhere, he is simply following the structure of Grim's life. Still, as long as conclusive proof remains lacking, inverted commas will remain around this author's name. [3, 16, 17, 24, 41]

The Lansdowne Anonymous (Anonymous III)

This is the name given to three distinct fragmentary tracts found in the Lansdowne MS 398 in the British Museum. The most interesting is the third, which provides an account not found elsewhere of the aftermath to Thomas's murder. [56, 57]

Summa Causae inter regem et Thomam

This anonymous work gives an account of the early phases of the dispute between king and archbishop, from the Council at Westminster in October 1163 to Henry's persecution of Thomas's supporters in the early aftermath of the exile. The account of Westminster is one of the most detailed among the Lives. [18]

Herbert of Bosham

Herbert's is the longest, the most complex and perhaps the most rewarding of the Lives. He was Thomas's clerk as chancellor and remained with him when he became archbishop. He was at his master's side throughout the exile and was present at all the major councils and conferences, but, to his great regret, he was sent to France on business just before Thomas's murder. Herbert was on more intimate terms with Thomas than any of the other biographers, and we find many examples of the disciple giving advice, usually very extreme, to the archbishop. He had spent his formative years in Paris where he became an accomplished theologian, and he applied these skills to the story of Thomas's life and death, which he approached in the manner of an exegete. His Life, which was not completed until 1184–86, is self-consciously a 'Gospel according to Herbert', indeed he follows John the Evangelist in describing himself as 'the disciple who wrote these things'. Many have found his theological digressions tedious and irrelevant, but closer inspection shows them to be an integral part of his work. Herbert's Life is an invaluable historical source, but it is also the work of a highly original artist. [9, 12, 15, 21, 26, 29, 31, 33, 36, 37, 40, 44, 49]

The Icelandic Saga

The extant version of the Saga was not written until the fourteenth century, but it is based on earlier sources: a lost Life by Robert of Cricklade, written 1173–74, a Life in French verse by Benet of St Albans, largely derivative of Robert of Cricklade, and an Icelandic translation of the *Quadriologus*, a composite Life based on twelfth-century biographers. It provides some unique details, for instance that Thomas spoke with a stammer.

The road to Canterbury (?1118–62)

Both medieval and modern commentators have tended to take more interest in Thomas of Canterbury than in Thomas of London. Then and now, more information has been available for the eight years when Thomas was archbishop than for the forty-four or so that preceded them, and those eight years have appeared to hold more for those who sought either proofs of sanctity or material for research. But although the years up to 1162 are usually presented as a prelude to the drama that followed, they contain much of colour and significance, and are essential to an understanding of Thomas's later life. The rise of this London merchant's son to one of the most important positions in the governance of the Angevin Empire is in itself a remarkable story of talent, ambition and patronage, and affords a valuable insight into the changing face of England in the middle of the twelfth century. Many of Thomas's abiding character traits are evident early on, and later events were often shaped by the nature of Thomas's background and training, and his friendship with King Henry. Furthermore, Thomas's early life was controversial: it formed the basis of much subsequent criticism, and led his biographers to develop the notion of a 'conversion' of 1162.

Thomas was born on 21 December, probably in 1118, the son of Gilbert Becket, a prosperous London merchant, and his wife Matilda. Of his youth we know little. His biographers describe it in terms found in many works of hagiography: omens of greatness surrounded his birth [1], his early years were distinguished by divine intervention, and saw the emergence of appropriate virtues [3]. We know that he was educated at the Augustinian priory of Merton, and then at a grammar school in London, possibly St Paul's.⁹ Also reported is a

⁹ *MTB* s. 14.

spell of study at Paris in the mid-1130s, the days of Abelard, Peter Lombard and Robert of Melun [2], but there is no evidence to suggest that Thomas was a great scholar. He had practical aptitude in abundance, though. His first opportunity to apply these talents came around the age of twenty-one when he entered upon a career as an accountant in the household of a London financier, Osbert Huitdeniers. Two or three years later he took his first steps towards a career in the Church when he was introduced to Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury, apparently made quite an impression, and became his clerk. In this distinguished household, which contained many future bishops, Thomas quickly rose to prominence. He was close to Theobald, and was his only companion when in 1148 the archbishop secretly made his way to the Council of Rheims against the orders of King Stephen. He studied law at Bologna and Auxerre, according to Fitzstephen,¹⁰ and he won many preferments, culminating in October 1154 when he became archdeacon of Canterbury. However, Thomas's ability to make enemies as well as friends was apparent early on. His biographers report how he attracted the hatred of some in Theobald's court, most notably Roger of Pont-l'Évêque, future archbishop of York and arch-enemy of Thomas [3].

Thomas's advancement progressed against a turbulent political background: the 'anarchy' of Stephen's reign, the accession of Henry II and the consolidation of his rule. Stephen's reign (1135-54) saw a reversal in the expansionist and centralising tendencies of Anglo-Norman kingship. The challenge to his crown from Matilda, daughter of Henry I, her husband Geoffrey count of Anjou, and Robert earl of Gloucester, and Stephen's inability to assert his authority, led to civil war and general disorder in England, the loss of the king's continental possessions, and in certain spheres a greater independence from the crown for the nobility and the Church. In the late 1140s the focus of opposition to Stephen shifted to Henry, son of Geoffrey and Matilda, and duke of Normandy from 1149. The death of Stephen's son and heir, Eustace, in 1153 provided an opportunity for the nobles and clergy of the realm to negotiate a peaceful succession, and under the terms of the Treaty of Winchester Stephen was allowed to retain his crown, but was to be succeeded by Henry on his death. Stephen died in 1154 and Henry smoothly acceded to a war-weary kingdom. From the start Henry made clear his intention to restore the kingdom, and royal power, to the position in which it had stood at the death of his

¹⁰ *MTB* 3. 17.

grandfather Henry I. Young, energetic and able, he quickly began to reverse the recent decline in royal esteem by destroying illegally-held castles, expelling mercenaries, restoring law and order and beginning the re-establishment of governmental institutions which had lapsed under Stephen. But he also managed to conciliate the most powerful groups within the kingdom. As an aid to smooth transition he appointed Richard de Lucy, a former administrator in Stephen's government, as royal justiciar, but balanced him with a powerful representative of the nobility, Robert de Beaumont, earl of Leicester, as co-justiciar. And, for his third major appointment he looked to the Church, where he found Thomas.

Thomas was appointed royal chancellor very shortly after Henry's accession, probably at Christmas 1154. The chancellor was one of the most important of the king's servants, being responsible for the royal chapel and writing office, and often acting on the king's behalf. Our best witness to Thomas's chancellorship, William Fitzstephen, provides a detailed account of his duties and way of life [4]. Particularly striking is his description of the chancellor's flamboyant embassy to the French king in 1158 and his role in the siege of Toulouse the following year and subsequent military operations [7]. He also describes the close friendship between the king and his chancellor, sixteen years his senior: 'Never in Christian times', he writes, 'were there two greater friends, more of one mind' [4]. Understandably, this image of Thomas as the king's servant and friend posed problems for those who later sought to present him as the champion of the Church, and provided ammunition for his critics within the Church. As chancellor Thomas was guilty of administering ecclesiastical revenues during vacancies, of imposing a heavy financial burden on the Church for the support of the Toulouse campaign, and in some cases openly supporting the king's authority over that of the Church. Nor did Thomas's extravagant display, his military prowess or his immersion in the ways of the royal court appear to accord with the life of a supposedly saintly prelate. The biographers do not hide Thomas's service to the king, nor the luxury of his life, but claim that behind this worldly exterior a true religious purpose was present. They claim that Thomas worked to restrain the king's more aggressive tendencies towards the Church [5], and in private led a life of chastity and austerity [6]. As many of them put it, while he may have appeared proud and vain on the outside, 'within, all was different'. Through his experience in the secular world, they argue, he developed the skills which he would apply to greater advantage as archbishop, and in the

office of chancellor he laid the foundations of the spiritual purpose which flourished after his consecration as archbishop.

When Theobald died in April 1161, Thomas was an obvious candidate to succeed him, but by no means proved an immediate replacement. Henry had had ample time to decide on a successor during Theobald's prolonged illness, but he kept the see vacant for a year while Thomas administered its revenues. The first we read of Thomas's candidacy is in William Fitzstephen's report of a conversation between the chancellor and the prior of Leicester, who predicts that Thomas will soon be archbishop [8]. Confirmation apparently came in May 1162 when the king took him aside and informed him of his intention [9]. Thomas immediately resisted the honour, citing his unsuitability for the task and the danger of losing the king's friendship, but eventually capitulated in deference to his duty towards the Church [9, 10]. In medieval writing it is difficult to find an appointment to high ecclesiastical office which was not resisted by its recipient, and Thomas's reported reluctance should not be taken at face value. Still, one can see why such a proposal might be greeted with trepidation. As a clerk appointed to a monastic cathedral, a royal courtier appointed to the highest Church office in the land could not only expect the opprobrium of the king, should he fail to follow the royal will, but also the mistrust of his monastic community and episcopal colleagues. The accounts of Thomas's election on 23 May suggest that such suspicion made itself known early on, with Gilbert Foliot, then bishop of Hereford and later bishop of London, openly voicing dissent, while others muttered their reservations [11]. Equally instructive is Herbert of Bosham's claim that immediately after the election, Thomas asked him to monitor not only his behaviour, but what others said about him [12].

We are told that as soon as Thomas was consecrated as archbishop, he underwent a dramatic transformation. 'Touched by the hand of God', he 'put off the old man and put on the new', taking on a new spirituality, symbolised by his secret adoption of the monastic garb and a hairshirt, and being imbued with new zeal for ecclesiastical liberty [13, 14]. The year 1162 is clearly a watershed in Thomas's life, but the biographers' explanation of the difference in the archbishop's subsequent behaviour in terms of a dramatic conversion has been received sceptically by modern writers, who have tended to see it as a hagiographical flourish inconsistent with the evidence. Thomas, they argue, did not change from Saul to Paul, as his earlier life was never

excessively sinful and his later life not always virtuous.¹¹ However, a closer look at what the biographers say suggests that they do not make such a claim for Thomas: his was not a Pauline conversion, but rather a catalyst by which he was enabled to achieve more fully the potential which had always been there. Nor is it an isolated claim: the idea of ongoing conversion is integrated into the Lives, most notably after Clarendon, during his stay at Pontigny in exile, and culminating in his martyrdom.¹² Even if we do not accept the explanation of conversion, it is clear that some change happened. The most widely accepted interpretation is that Thomas was an actor who capably and enthusiastically fitted into whatever role presented itself.¹³ Such an interpretation seems fair, but it should not be so surprising that Thomas should change his approach to the king, to the Church and to his own life. As Herbert of Bosham points out, even holy men – not only Paul, but David and Peter – change. Inconsistency is a normal human trait, even if hagiographers do not often allow it to their subjects. It is just that perhaps Thomas changed more, and more often, than most.

Conflict with the king (1162–64)

Thomas's establishment as archbishop led to a crisis of unprecedented severity between the crown and the Church in England. The breakdown of relations was the product of tensions between an acquisitive and energetic royal power and a confident post-Gregorian Church which had been emerging for a century, but it was driven by the robust personalities of Henry and Thomas. Between 1162 and 1164 the conflict took shape primarily as a dispute over jurisdiction, and although the points of contention during this period came to be complicated and augmented over the years, they were never properly resolved during Thomas's lifetime, and remained at the heart of the dispute. Though partisan, the biographers are excellent witnesses to the emergent dispute. They not only provide vivid eyewitness accounts of many of the episodes in which the dispute was played out – most notably in William Fitzstephen's description of the Council of Northampton [23] – but also reveal an incisive appreciation of the significance of the issues at stake.

11 See, for example, D. Knowles, 'Thomas Becket: a Character Study', in *The Historian and Character and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 98–128, esp. p. 100.

12 For a fuller exposition of this argument see M. Staunton, 'Thomas Becket's Conversion', *Anglo-Norman Studies*, 21 (1999), 193–211.

13 See Z. N. Brooke, *The English Church and the Papacy* (Cambridge, 1931), pp. 193–4.

The dispute took time to emerge. Those biographers – a large majority – who present it as an immediate consequence of Thomas's appointment, pass over his co-operation with the king which marked his first year as archbishop and was found even in his second. Herbert of Bosham, in contrast, lays stress on the early concord so as to make the descent into animosity all the more dramatic [15]. He describes how, on the king's return to England in January 1163, he was so gladdened by his first sight of Thomas as archbishop, that he paid more attention to him than to his own son. In the following months Thomas was often involved in the king's affairs until May when he departed for the papal council at Tours with the king's blessing. Herbert also cites their joint role in the translation of Edward the Confessor and the dedication of Reading Abbey. However, Herbert neglects to mention that the first occurred in October 1163 and the second in April 1164. In fact, the idea of a phase of peace which was then suddenly shattered is as misleading as the picture of a conflict erupting immediately upon Thomas's consecration. The evidence shows that co-operation and contention coexisted from the start until rising contention made further co-operation first difficult and then impossible.

Within weeks of his accession to Canterbury, to the king's surprise, Thomas declared his independence by resigning the office of chancellor. Further proof that he meant to take seriously his duties as archbishop came when he began to reclaim lands and rights which he believed had been unfairly given or taken away from Canterbury [15]. These disputes not only served to make enemies of some powerful nobles, but eventually embroiled their lord, the king. In July 1163 a direct confrontation arose between king and archbishop when Henry attempted to claim for his exchequer the revenues traditionally paid by the Church for the support of his local officials. Thomas refused to accept this new practice and the king resentfully backed down [16]. Around the same time Henry demanded Thomas go back on his excommunication of William of Eynsford, a powerful landholder who had expelled some clerks who had recently been intruded into his parish church, and this time it was the king who prevailed [17]. A case with more far-reaching consequences was that of Philip de Broi, a canon of Bedford who had been accused of killing a certain knight. As a clerk, he was tried by an ecclesiastical court which freed him. When a lay justice attempted to reopen the case, Philip verbally abused him. The justice complained to the king, and Philip was brought before a group of bishops and nobles who imposed a mild sentence for his

insult to the judge, but did not convict him on the charge of murder [16]. The case of Philip de Broi focused attention on the issue of 'criminous clerks' – the trial and punishment of churchmen guilty of serious offences. Enraged by this and other cases [17], Henry called a general council of the Church to be held at Westminster in October 1163.

It was at Westminster that the dispute began to take on a definite form [18]. Henry first demanded that clerks convicted of serious crimes be deprived of the Church's protection and handed over to the secular power. When the bishops, led by Thomas, rejected Henry's demand, citing the distinctive nature of the clergy, the king adopted a different approach. He now demanded a general observance of his royal customs, that is, the rights which he believed his predecessors had held. After discussion with the bishops, Thomas declared that he would observe the king's customs, but only 'saving his order', that is, where they did not conflict with the law of the Church. Henry left the council in a rage, and a meeting between king and archbishop at Northampton shortly afterwards did nothing to repair relations [19]. Up to now the bishops had stood firm behind Thomas, but during the autumn of 1163 Roger of York, Gilbert of London and Hilary of Chichester began to qualify their support. Finally, after papal pressure, Thomas agreed to remove the qualification to his observance of the royal customs at a private meeting with Henry. But the king demanded this be done publicly, and to this end called a council of the realm to meet at Clarendon in January 1164. The accounts of this important episode do not give us a full picture, but the following details may be made out. Henry demanded a full public acknowledgement of the customs, to which Thomas and the bishops were eventually persuaded. Then, to the surprise of the bishops, Henry demanded that the specific customs of the realm be enunciated and written down in a document [20], to which the bishops were to affix their seals as sign of recognition. At first Thomas refused, then gave a verbal recognition, but did not affix his seal [19]. This was the worst of all worlds. By his refusal to give full assent Thomas had managed to alienate the king, and at the same time, by failing to stand up for the Church he had lost the confidence of his episcopal colleagues. This was Thomas's lowest point, an episode which John of Salisbury would later describe as 'a single fall'.¹⁴ In penance, Thomas suspended himself from service at the altar until he received absolution from the pope [21].

14 *LJS* no. 305, pp. 726–7.

After Clarendon, relations between king and archbishop were decidedly cool. At one point, Thomas is said to have come to visit the king at Woodstock only to have the gates slammed in his face. In late summer Thomas tried to flee the country, but bad weather forced his boat back to England [22]. For his biographers this was a sign from God that he had yet to be tried and proven in England. The Council of Northampton in October 1164 [23] was a trial in every sense of the word. It began as a judicial procedure through which the king hoped to humiliate the archbishop, but as it progressed, Thomas succeeded in presenting it as an act of endurance on behalf of Christ and the Church, a battle for righteousness in the mould of the trials of the apostles and the early Christian martyrs. When a knight called John FitzGilbert claimed that he had not received justice in the archbishop's court on a land plea, Thomas was summoned to the king's court, but did not turn up. Consequently he was summoned to a royal council, to be judged by the lay and ecclesiastical magnates on a charge of contempt to the king. Thomas was quickly found guilty, but Henry pressed on, accusing him of embezzlement during his time as chancellor. Thomas replied that he had not been summoned to hear that charge. There followed two days of debate and negotiation, with the clergy passing between king and archbishop. On the sixth day, as threats and tension rose, the archbishop fell ill, but on the next day he rose from his bed for one of the most dramatic days of his life. In the morning he celebrated the Mass of St Stephen, the first Christian martyr, with its introit, 'For princes did also sit and speak against me', and then proceeded to court carrying his cross before him. In the presence of the bishops and nobles he announced that he had appealed to the pope against the bishops, prohibiting them from judging him on any secular charge. The bishops, finding themselves 'between hammer and anvil', unwilling to refuse the king's command that they pronounce judgement, but also unable to go against Thomas's prohibition, in turn appealed to the pope's judgement. The king then excused the bishops from partaking in the judgement but continued to press the lay magnates to give sentence. Thomas, however, refused to hear sentence, and stormed out of the castle to jeers and curses. He and his men hurriedly mounted their horses and hastened to their lodgings. A few hours later Thomas took to flight.

Thomas's biographers lay the blame for the dispute at Henry's door. He, they claim, led astray by bad counsel, embarked upon a 'design against the Church' which would have succeeded in its purpose had Thomas not stood up for ecclesiastical liberties. Henry's insistence on

THIS COLLECTION tells the story of Thomas Becket's turbulent life, violent death and extraordinary posthumous acclaim in the words of his contemporaries.

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FRONT COVER—The earliest illustration of Becket's martyrdom, from the 'Becket leaves' c. 1180. Reproduced with permission of The British Library, MS Claudius B, ii, f.214v.

