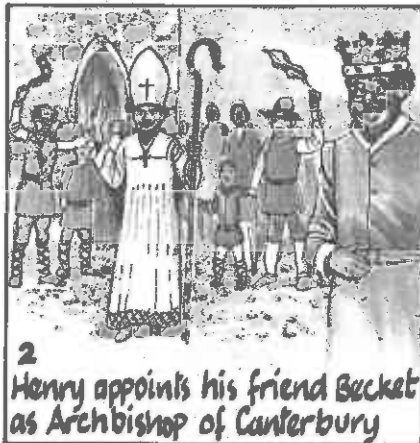


The murder of an Archbishop



1 Becket and Henry are friends



2 Henry appoints his friend Becket as Archbishop of Canterbury



3 Becket and Henry quarrel over who controls the church

YOU have already seen how important the Church was in everybody's lives. You have also seen that the head of the Church was not the King but the Pope in Rome. This meant that disputes broke out between the Pope's BISHOPS and the King about who should control the Church in England. These disputes came to a head in Henry II's reign:

- Kings often appointed their friends and officials as bishops. These men had no interest in the Church. Often, they kept working for the King's government and neglected their Church duties. For example, they did nothing about PRIESTS who were not doing their jobs properly. Having his men as bishops helped Henry to control the Church in England. The Pope claimed Henry had no right to appoint bishops.

- The Pope said that the CLERGY should be tried in Church courts rather than in the King's courts. Church courts rarely handed out severe punishments to clergy. Henry wanted everyone to come under the power of his courts. He had a list of over 100 murders committed by churchmen who had escaped the King's courts.



4 Becket flees abroad but Henry asks him to come home



5 Becket and Henry quarrel again



SOURCE 1 When clergy committed crimes they were often given light punishments like a short spell in the stocks

Why did Henry and Becket quarrel?

SOURCE 2 Written in the 1180s by Gerald of Wales, a bishop

“Henry was a man of reddish, freckled complexion, with a large round head and grey eyes which glowed fiercely and grew bloodshot in anger.”

SOURCE 3 A recent description of Becket

“Becket was a vain, obstinate and ambitious man, who sought always to keep himself in the public eye; he was above all a man of extremes, a man who knew no half measures.”

In 1162 Henry II made his close friend Thomas Becket Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket was already Chancellor, and for a number of years he had been running the government for Henry. This looked like a clever move by Henry, as it would surely put the Church under his control. But he soon discovered that he had made a mistake, as Sources 4–10 will show you. Very soon, Becket and Henry found themselves arguing.

SOURCE 4 From a recent history book

“Becket refused to allow a priest who had killed a man and raped the daughter to be tried in the King’s court. He put him in a bishop’s prison for protection against the King’s men.”

SOURCE 5 Written by Becket to the King

“It is certain that kings receive their power from the Church. You have not the power to give orders to bishops, nor to drag priests before your courts.”

There were attempts to patch up the quarrel, but as Sources 6–8 show you, they were not successful.

SOURCE 6 Written by Henry to Becket

“My Lord Archbishop, let us return to our old friendship, and help each other as best we can, forgetting our hatred completely.”

SOURCE 7 Written by William of Newburgh, not long after the events he is describing

“The Archbishop returned to England with the permission of the King. But unknown to the King he carried with him letters directed against a number of bishops. As soon as he was in England he excommunicated them.”

SOURCE 8 What Henry is reported to have said

“What miserable traitors I have nourished and promoted in my household, who let their lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a low-born priest.”

SOURCE 9 From a nineteenth-century children’s history book

“Becket wanted to be as great a man as the King, and tried to stop the judges punishing wicked clergy. For this reason there were sad quarrels between the King and Becket.”

SOURCE 10 From a twentieth-century children’s history book

“Henry was a strong King. He tried to force the clergy to obey his rules, and in a fit of temper made some of his knights kill Becket.”

1. What kind of men do Henry and Becket seem to be? Do any of these words describe them well: stubborn, weak, unreasonable, bad-tempered, fair, deceitful?
2. Henry and Becket were once great friends. Why did they end up as enemies? Use evidence from Sources 2–8 to support your answer.
3. Look at Sources 9 and 10. Who do the writers blame for the quarrel? Use the evidence on this page to explain why these historians disagree.

THE MURDER OF AN ARCHBISHOP

How was Becket murdered?

In 1170, Becket and Henry seemed to have settled their arguments. Becket returned to England. But as soon as he arrived at Canterbury he expelled all the bishops who supported the King from the Church.

Henry was still in Normandy, and when he heard this news some reports say he shouted out, 'Is there no one who will rid me of this troublesome priest?' Other writers say simply that Henry showed his deep anger by his face and gestures.

Whichever is true, four knights decided that they should kill Becket, and they sailed for England. They arrived in Canterbury on the afternoon of 29 December 1170.

SOURCE 11 This account is by William Fitzstephen. He was Becket's clerk and friend

"One of the knights struck him with the flat of his sword between the shoulders, saying, 'Fly, you are a dead man.' The knights tried to drag him out of the church. But the monks held him back.

Edward Grim, one of the monks, putting his arm up, received the first stroke of the sword and was severely wounded. By this same stroke the Archbishop was wounded in the head.

As he knelt down clasping and stretching his hands out to God, a second stroke was dealt him on the head, at which he fell by the altar.

While he lay there Richard Brito struck him with such force that the sword was broken against his head. Four wounds in all did the saintly Archbishop receive.

The whole of the crown of his head was lopped off. But he didn't try to avoid or parry the blows. He accepted death from a desire to be with God.

Hugh of Horsea extracted the blood and brains from the hollow of his head with the point of a sword.

SOURCE 12 This account is by Edward Grim, a priest, who was with Becket at the time of his death

"The murderers came in full armour, with swords and axes. The monks cried out to the Archbishop to flee to the church. But he had long since yearned for martyrdom and dreaded that it would be delayed if he fled to the church. But the monks pulled, dragged and pushed him into the church. The four knights followed with rapid strides. The Archbishop ordered the doors of the church to be kept open.

In a spirit of mad fury the knights called out, 'Where is Thomas Becket, traitor to the King and the country?' At this he quite unafraid came down the steps and answered, 'Here I am, no traitor to the King, but a priest.'

Having said this he stood by a pillar.

'You shall die this instant,' they cried.

They pulled and dragged him violently trying to get him outside the church. But they could not get him away from the pillar. Then he inclined his head as one in prayer and joined his hands together and uplifted them.

The wicked knight leapt suddenly upon him and wounded him in the head.

Next he received a second blow on the head, but still he stood firm.

At the third blow he fell on his knees and elbows, saying in a low voice, 'For the name of Jesus I am ready to die.'

The next blow separated the crown of his head and the blood white with the brain and the brain red with the blood stained the floor.

The fourth knight warded off any who sought to interfere.

A fifth man placed his foot on the neck of the holy priest and scattered the brains and blood about the pavement.



SOURCE 13 A painting of Becket's death, made in the thirteenth century

1. How do the accounts of Becket's death in Sources 11 and 12 differ?
2. What evidence is there in their accounts that both these writers were sympathetic to Becket?
3. Does the fact that they are both on Becket's side mean they cannot be trusted?
4. Is there any evidence that Becket wanted to die?
5. How reliable do you think Source 13 is?
6. Which gives you the best idea of what happened, the written accounts or the painting?
7. Who do you think was to blame for Becket's death: Henry, Becket or the knights who killed him? Explain your answer.

Who won?

- Becket was made a saint in 1173 by the Pope.
- One year after Becket's death Henry came to Canterbury and was flogged by the monks as a punishment.
- Pilgrims flocked to Becket's tomb at Canterbury, and still do.
- The monarch kept the power to appoint bishops.
- 80 churches and two hospitals were named after Becket.
- The CLERGY were still tried in Church courts.

1. Some of these results are short-term ones and some are long-term.
 - a) Who do you think won in the short term?
 - b) Who do you think won in the long term?
 Explain your answers.