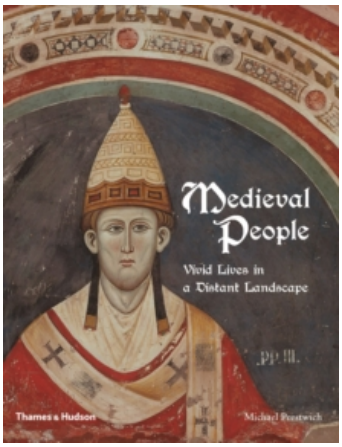

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Thomas Becket

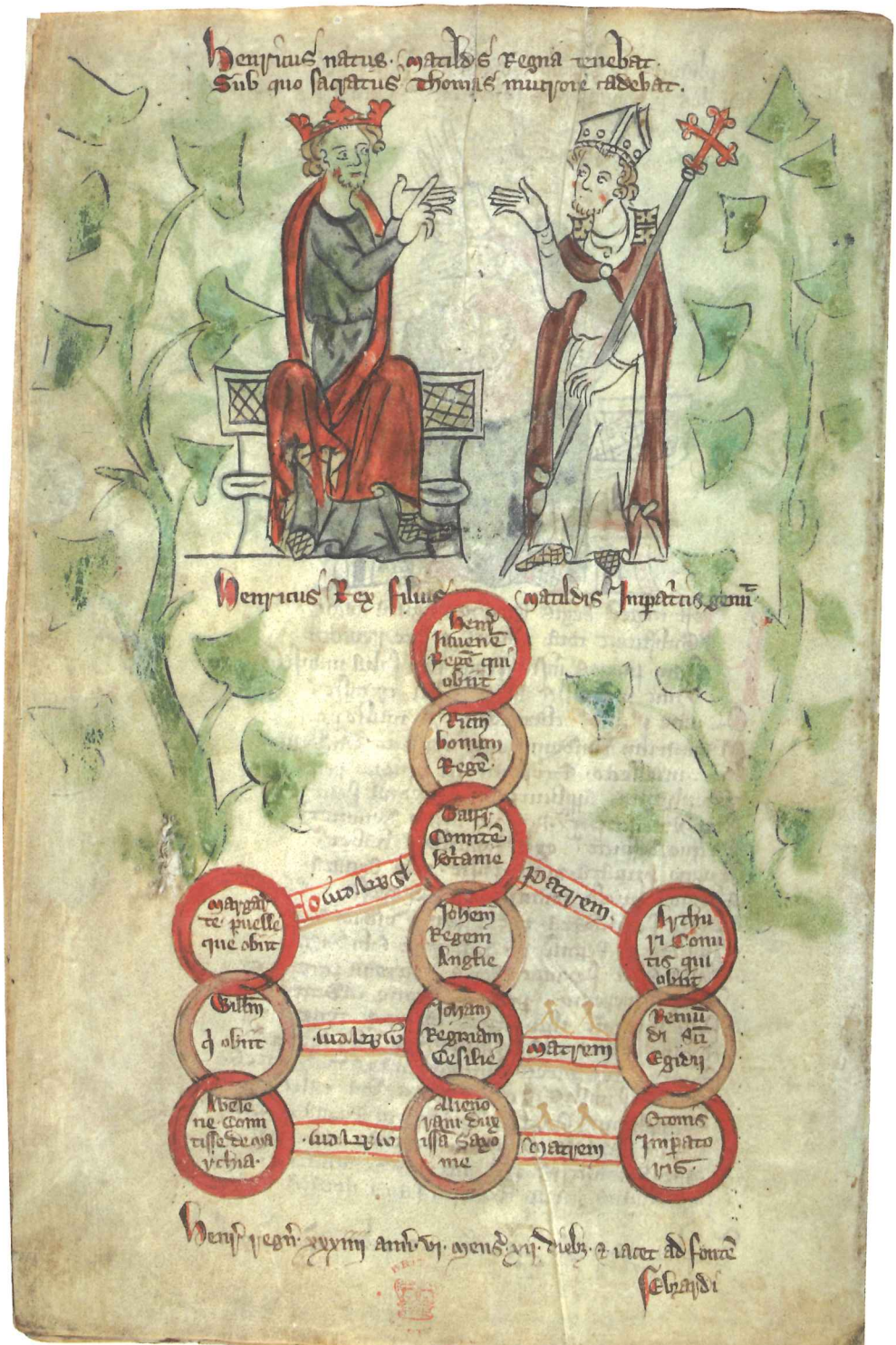
MARTYRED ARCHBISHOP AND SAINT

1120–70

Thomas Becket's mother was a Muslim princess who followed his father, Gilbert, to England after he escaped from captivity on the crusades. She was recognized by Gilbert's servant as she walked the streets of London in search of her lover. That, at least, was the legend, and like much that has been said about Thomas, there is no truth to it. In reality, Thomas Becket's parents were reasonably well-off Londoners of Norman origin.

Thomas began his career in the household of Theobald, archbishop of Canterbury. He was undoubtedly clever; his exceptional abilities even extended, according to one commentator, to an acute sense of smell. However, his education did not extend to formal training in the higher academic disciplines, notably those of canon law and theology. In 1155, he entered royal service as chancellor, an astonishing appointment for a man with no experience of government. Seven years later, King Henry II engineered Thomas's election as archbishop of Canterbury. Relations between king and archbishop, however, soon broke down, with Thomas's refusal to accept the guidelines of the 1164 Constitutions of Clarendon, which attempted to define the relationship between Church and state. Thomas was put on trial at

An early fourteenth-century illustration of the implausible story of how Thomas Becket's mother was recognized on the streets of London.


Henricus natus · matildis regina tenebat
Sub quo sagacius thomas mundum rabebat
Henricus Rex filius matildis Imperatrix

Northampton and fled abroad. Although he eventually succeeded in reaching a settlement with the king, which ended his exile in 1170, it was all too evident that there was no real agreement between them. Henry addressed his knights: 'What miserable drones and traitors have I nourished in my household, who let their lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a low-born clerk!' Thomas's savage murder in Canterbury cathedral swiftly followed.

'Humble at heart, yet proud in appearance, humble with the poor, but overbearing with the great, a lamb within and a leopard without', Thomas was very different things to different people. It was hard to understand how it was that the extravagant and worldly chancellor became the committed and unworldly defender of the rights and privileges of the Church. Did he undergo a Damascene conversion, or was he chameleon-like in his capacity to take on the colours of whatever role he was playing?

There is little doubting Thomas's ambition, as he rose from merchant's son to be one of the chief men in the kingdom. As he climbed upwards at each stage of his career Thomas had little difficulty in casting aside any baggage from the past, abandoning friendships as he went. He did not, however, forget his enemies. He and Roger of Pont l'Evêque had been rivals in Archbishop Theobald's household, and it was galling to Thomas when Roger became archbishop of York in 1154. His fury in 1170, when Roger crowned the heir to the throne, Henry II's son Henry, led almost inexorably to the final tragedy of his martyrdom.

Thomas believed in making a show. He was extravagant as chancellor, throwing himself with enthusiasm into the grandeur of the post. His house was said to glisten with gold and silver ornaments. When he went on an embassy to Paris, he had a magnificent following of 200, and took twenty-four changes of clothes for himself. As archbishop, his extravagance took a different turn. His household was splendid, and the food in his hall was opulent, but he ate modestly himself, and had the leftovers distributed to the poor. Where his predecessor, Archbishop Theobald, had been generous in giving alms, Thomas was twice as bountiful. Even in the dark days after Thomas fled from his trial at Northampton into exile, he remained grand in manner; an innkeeper and his serving girl had no difficulty in identifying him from his posture and the way that he ate.

Thomas's admirers saw one clear element of consistency in his career: he remained chaste throughout his life. He and the king may have enjoyed chasing game together, but Thomas did not share Henry's taste for pursuing women. He believed in mortifying the flesh; when in exile at Pontigny, he took to immersing himself for hours in a cold stream 'in an effort to purge himself of the stings of desire that still seemed to dwell in him'. It was only on his death that the hair shirt he had always worn was discovered, along with the vermin that infested it. Claims that Thomas led a secret life of chastity and self-mortification provided his supporters with a way to equate the grand and arrogant chancellor with the martyred archbishop.

Thomas Becket confronting King Henry II, in an illustration from an early fourteenth-century chronicle. A royal geneaology is below.

Thomas Becket's death at the hands of Henry II's knights. The top of his head was sliced off with a sword. After his murder, a great many lice crawled out of his clothes.

Thomas's achievements as chancellor, however, were limited. He successfully negotiated a treaty with France, and he distinguished himself in war, even defeating a French knight in single combat. He also gained considerable wealth; he held the Tower of London, the estate or castlery of Eye in Suffolk, and Berkhamstead castle. No doubt he contributed to the good government of the country following the difficult days of the civil war in King Stephen's reign, but his role in imposing taxes on the Church did nothing for his popularity. The significant reforms of Henry's reign, notably in the law, came after Thomas's years of royal service were over.

Equally, as archbishop, Thomas failed to provide the leadership that the Church needed. He did not have the support of most of the English bishops in his dispute with the king, nor did he even have the backing of the monks of his own cathedral. When he was first elected, he was justifiably concerned to restore all the lands and rights of his see, but his long exile in France meant that he was unable to defend it from the depredations of royal officials. He was not a man capable of effective compromise, as the final breakdown of his relationship with Henry II, which culminated with his brutal martydom, all too starkly show.

Had he not been martyred, Thomas would surely not have had a high reputation. However, in his death he achieved far more than he had in life. Although he was not inconsistent in all things, and was indeed a man of genuine piety, he was, above all, ambitious, arrogant and unbending. A key issue in his quarrel with the king had been whether clergy who committed crimes could be punished in royal courts. The matter involved difficult and technical questions of canon law, but Thomas's martyrdom effectively settled the matter. Within a few years, it was agreed that clerics could claim immunity from the jurisdiction of the king's courts, except in cases where they had infringed forest law or where they held secular land. A cult quickly developed at Canterbury around Thomas, who was canonized in 1173. Miracles soon abounded; the martyr's blood, suitably diluted, healed many. As befitted a man who once hunted with the king, he even proved to be good at curing sick falcons. Notably celebrated by Geoffrey Chaucer (see pp. 225–28), the journey to the murdered archbishop's shrine in Canterbury cathedral became the most important and popular pilgrimage in England for the remainder of the Middle Ages.