

**MEDIEVAL ENGLAND
(410-1485): HENRY II
AND THOMAS BECKET**



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Description

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain why King Henry II and Archbishop Thomas Becket quarreled, what eventually happened to both men as a result of their conflict, and how Henry II's penance and prostration in front of Thomas Becket's tomb was seen as appropriate in a time where the Catholic Church had power over the state, not only in England, but also in all of Christendom.

Subjects

World History
European History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- Canterbury Cathedral
- Westminster Abbey
- Fontevraud Abbey, Chinon, France

Essential Questions

- Who was Thomas Becket? Who was Henry II of England?
- Why did Henry II and Becket end up in a crisis over the power of the church in England? Why was Becket murdered? Did Henry II sanction Becket's murder?
- How did Henry II react to Becket's murder?
- How did Henry II reconcile with the Roman Catholic Church after Becket's death?
- How are Henry II and Thomas Becket seen by the English public today?

Academic Summary

The bishops, on account of the offence before mentioned (which I could wish to have remained unnoticed at the time), being suspended, at the instance of the venerable Thomas, from all episcopal functions, by the authority of the apostolic see, the king was exasperated by the complaints of some of them, and grew angry and indignant beyond measure, and losing the mastery of himself, in the heat of his exuberant passion, from the abundance of his perturbed spirit, poured forth the language of indiscretion. On which, four of the bystanders, men of noble race and renowned in arms, wrought themselves up to the commission of iniquity through zeal for their earthly master; and leaving the royal presence, and crossing the sea, with as much haste as if posting to a solemn banquet, and urged on by the fury they had imbibed, they arrived at Canterbury on the fifth day after Christmas, where they found the venerable archbishop occupied in the celebration of that holy festival with religious joy. Proceeding to him just as he had dined, and was sitting with certain honorable personages, omitting even to salute him, and holding forth the terror of the king's name, they commanded (rather than asked, or admonished him) forthwith to remit the suspension of the prelates who had obeyed the king's pleasure, to whose contempt and disgrace this act redounded. On his replying that the sentence of a higher power was not to be abrogated by an inferior one, and that it was not his concern to pardon persons suspended not by himself, but by the Roman pontiff, they had recourse to violent threats. Undismayed at these words, though uttered by men raging and extremely exasperated, he spoke with singular freedom and confidence. In consequence, becoming more enraged than before, they hastily retired, and bringing their arms, (for they had entered without them,) they prepared themselves, with loud clamor and indignation, for the commission of a most atrocious crime. The venerable prelate was persuaded by his friends to avoid the madness of these furious savages, by retiring into the holy church. When, from his determination to brave every danger, he did not acquiesce, on the forcible and tumultuous approach of his enemies, he was at length dragged by the friendly violence of his associates to the protection of the holy church. The monks were solemnly chanting vespers to Almighty God, as he entered the sacred temple of Christ, shortly to become an evening sacrifice. The servants of Satan pursued having neither respect as Christians to his holy order, nor to the sacred place, or season; but attacking the dignified prelate as he stood in prayer before the holy altar, even during the festival of Christmas, these truly nefarious Christians most inhumanly murdered him. Having done the deed, and retiring as if triumphant, they departed with unhallowed joy. Recollecting, however, that perhaps the transaction might displease the person in whose behalf they had been so zealous, they retired to the northern parts of England, waiting until they could fully discover the disposition of their monarch towards them.

From William of Newburgh: Becket and Henry, History of English Affairs, 1200 CE

And they asked again, "Where is the archbishop of Canterbury?" That one himself responded to them, "Here I am, the servant of Christ, whom you seek." One of the murderous knights retorted to him in a spirit of fury, "You will die in a moment; it is truly impossible that you live any longer." However the archbishop responded with no less steadiness in words as in spirit: "I am prepared to die for my God, and for the establishment of justice, and for the freedom of the church. But if you seek my head, I forbid, on behalf of Almighty God, and under anathema, that you should harm in any way anyone else, whether monk or cleric or layman, great or small, but let them be immune from penalty, as they are not involved in this." These words of his are seen to imitate Christ speaking in the Passion: "If you seek me, let these men go." [John 18:18] With these words, seeing the butchers with drawn swords, he bowed his head in the manner of praying, offering these words: "To God and the Blessed Mary, and to the holy patrons of this church, and to the Blessed Denis, I commend my very self and the cause of my church." Then in all these tortures the martyr, of unconquered soul and admirable steadfastness, did not utter a word or cry, did not bring forth a groan, nor lay bare his arm or his garment to the one striking him, but offered his bowed head to their swords, holding fast until it was accomplished.

Thereupon the aforementioned knights, fearing a multitude of both sexes rushing on them from all sides, and lest he be delivered by the prayer he had begun, sped their villainy. And when one of them reaching out brandished his sword at the head of the archbishop, he

nearly cut off the arm of a certain cleric, who was called Edward Grim, and likewise wounded the anointed of the Lord in the head. Truly that cleric stretched out his arm over the head of the father, so that he might receive the blows or rather divert the blow of the one striking. He stood thus far just on behalf of justice, patient as a lamb, innocent without a murmur, without complaint, and offered himself as a complete offering to the Lord. And lest any of the deadly vassals be able to argue later that he was blameless, the second and third cruelly smashed their swords against the top of the head of the steadfast athlete, crushed it, and threw down to the ground the victim of the Holy Spirit. Truly the fourth, raving with furious cruelty all the more, cut off the tonsured crown of the dying man already prostrate, scattered the top of the head and, inserting the sharp point into the head, poured forth the brain with blood over the stone pavement. Thereupon in the beginning of the seventh year of his exile, the aforementioned martyr Thomas, for the law of his God, and for the justice of his church, which had completely perished in the English church, struggled all the way unto death, and did not fear the words of the impious, but founded on the rock which is Christ, for the name of Christ, in the church of Christ, by the swords of the wicked, on the fifth day of Christmas, that is on the day after the feast of the Innocents, he himself lay down innocent. Then all ran away, leaving him behind, so that what was written might be fulfilled: "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."

From the Chronicle of Benedict of Peterborough: The Murder of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, 29 Dec 1170

He had barely finished speaking when the impious knight, fearing that [Thomas] would be saved by the people and escape alive, suddenly set upon him and, shaving off the summit of his crown which the sacred chrism consecrated to God, he wounded the sacrificial lamb of God in the head; the lower arm of the writer was cut by the same blow. Indeed [the writer] stood firmly with the holy archbishop, holding him in his arms - while all the clerics and monks fled - until the one he had raised in opposition to the blow was severed. Behold the simplicity of the dove, behold the wisdom of the serpent in this martyr who presented his body to the killers so that he might keep his head, in other words his soul and the church, safe; nor would he devise a trick or a snare against the slayers of the flesh so that he might preserve himself because it was better that he be free from this nature! O worthy shepherd who so boldly set himself against the attacks of wolves so that the sheep might not be torn to pieces! and because he abandoned the world, the world - wanting to overpower him - unknowingly elevated him. Then, with another blow received on the head, he remained firm. But with the third the stricken martyr bent his knees and elbows, offering himself as a living sacrifice, saying in a low voice, "For the name of Jesus and the protection of the church I am ready to embrace death." But the third knight inflicted a grave wound on the fallen one; with this blow he shattered the sword on the stone and his crown, which was large, separated from his head so that the blood turned white from the brain yet no less did the brain turn red from the blood; it purpled the appearance of the church with the colors of the lily and the rose, the colors of the Virgin and Mother and the life and death of the confessor and martyr. The fourth knight drove away those who were gathering so that the others could finish the murder more freely and boldly. The fifth - not a knight but a cleric who entered with the knights - so that a fifth blow might not be spared him who had imitated Christ in other things, placed his foot on the neck of the holy priest and precious martyr and (it is horrible to say) scattered the brains with the blood across the floor, exclaiming to the rest, "We can leave this place, knights, he will not get up again."

Edward Grim: the Murder of Thomas Becket

On 29 December 1170, Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, was murdered in the main hall of the Canterbury Cathedral by four knights loyal to King Henry II. Becket's murder brought to a head the conflict between the monarch and the Church in England.

After the Norman invasion a century earlier, English monarchs often battled with the papacy over religious and secular issues in their new realm. English monarchs in the 12th century looked to the appointment of their own men into religious posts as a way to increase and consolidate their power at the expense of the Church. King Henry II was no different. When the Archbishop of Canterbury died in 1162, Henry, facing a challenge from secular and religious sectors both inside and outside of his kingdom, saw the opportunity to appoint one of his best friends to the post. Thomas Becket seemed like the perfect choice.

The king believed that Becket, one of his oldest friends and Lord Chancellor of England for the previous six years, would simply defer to the king's judgment on royal and religious matters, but he was quickly mistaken. Once he received his new appointment, Becket seemed to have a change of heart towards the king. According to multiple sources from the time, Archbishop Becket believed that he owed God, not the monarch, his primary allegiance, a position that immediately caused problems between the two old friends. Unfortunately, both men were strong-willed and unbending. Over the next few years, there were numerous times where the king and his bishop could have mended their past relationship, but to no avail. By 1164, Becket had been condemned of contempt of royal authority and had fled to France. Eventually, after almost six years, in June 1170 the archbishop returned to Canterbury after a compromise was worked out between Henry and the Church. It was thought that Becket would allow time and inertia to pass before causing any trouble, but within weeks the archbishop was issuing bulls of excommunication against some of Henry's staunchest allies. When three of Henry's bishops were excommunicated in November 1170, they fled to the king at his secondary palace in Normandy. At dinner one night (probably after drinking too much mead or wine), Henry is supposed to have yelled "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" It is probable that the king yelled something (many different accounts surfaced), but he later denied calling for Becket's death. Nonetheless, four knights, Reginald FitzUrse, Hugh de Morville, William de Tracy and Richard le Breton, traveled to Canterbury to see Becket. According to multiple sources, when they reached Canterbury, they confronted the Archbishop, informing him that he was to go to Winchester to give an accounting of his actions, but Becket refused. The knights then retrieved their weapons (which had been left outside of the cathedral), returned to the main hall of the church, and killed the Archbishop in cold blood.

Henry denied ordering the execution, but eventually he knew he needed to make peace with the Church. Pope Alexander III canonized Becket in Feb 1173, and in July 1174, King Henry II allowed himself to be whipped as he humbled himself at Becket's tomb. The knights who committed the murder traveled to Rome and met with Pope Alexander, who forgave them in exchange for their promise to serve on a crusade in the Holy Land for 14 years each.

Henry would go on to rule for another 15 years, until 1189, with much of his reign fraught with family squabbles, revolt and war. His son, Richard I (the Lionheart), assumed the throne when the king died.

Over the centuries, the conflict between Henry II and Thomas Becket has been analyzed by historians, church scholars, philosophers and students. Geoffrey Chaucer's great literary work, *Canterbury Tales*, even has as its backdrop a group of people going on pilgrimage to Becket's shrine. Today, Henry II is seen by most people as a man caught between two opposing forces, each vying for power in Medieval England. As for Becket, his image often depends on a person's religious feelings. Some see Becket as righteous and a martyr. Others see him as opportunistic and power hungry. Reality is probably somewhere in the middle. Students in the UK today study the conflict between Henry and Becket as a precursor to the English Reformation four centuries later, when the monarch (Henry VIII) finally took control of the Church.

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain why Henry II and Thomas Becket quarreled, what eventually happened to both men as a result of their conflict, and how Henry II's penance and prostration in front of Thomas Becket's tomb was seen as appropriate in a time where the Catholic Church had power over the state, not only in England, but also in all of Christendom.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the basic story of Henry II's conflict with Archbishop Thomas Becket and what happened to each man as a result of that conflict.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain why Henry II's penance and prostration at the tomb of Thomas Becket is seen as appropriate in an age when the Catholic Church held power over monarchs, not only in medieval England but also in the rest of Christendom.

Procedures

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What relationship should the Church and State have in a modern society? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Brief overview of Henry II and his conflict with Thomas Becket. (20 min)
- Video – Becket (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on Henry II and Thomas Becket, taking notes as appropriate. (25 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Suggestion: Students should consider the writer's possible bias when evaluating sources on each character to determine whether the writer has an agenda other than just relating facts.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: Discuss why Henry II and Thomas Becket quarreled, what eventually happened to both men as a result of their conflict, and how Henry II's penance and prostration in front of Thomas Becket's tomb was seen as appropriate in a time where the Catholic Church had power over the state, not only in England, but also in all of Christendom. (25 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the story of why Henry II and Thomas Becket quarreled, what eventually happened to both men as a result of their conflict, and how Henry II's penance and prostration in front of Thomas Becket's tomb was seen as appropriate in a time where the Catholic Church had power over the state, not only in England, but also in all of Christendom.

Extension

On tour: Canterbury Cathedral (Becket's memorial)

While on tour in Great Britain, students will visit Canterbury Cathedral, home to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the home cathedral to the Anglican Church, where they can see for themselves where Archbishop Becket was murdered and where a later shrine to Becket was built. The shrine became a popular destination for pilgrims (as detailed in [The Canterbury Tales](#)), and the monks at Canterbury profited greatly from the veneration of their former Archbishop. During the "Dissolution of the Monasteries" in 1538 under King Henry VIII, the saint's bones were dug up and destroyed, and a shrine that had been dedicated to him was also destroyed under the auspice of purging Christianity of its false relics (the gold ended up in Henry's coffers). Today, there is a modern memorial where the shrine once stood.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/Grim-becket.asp
Edward Grim: The Murder of Thomas Becket (primary source) – from the Medieval Internet Sourcebook at Fordham University
- www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/hoveden-becket.asp
Roger of Hoveden: the Chronicle: On the disputes between Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury and King Henry II of England (primary sources). From the Medieval Internet Sourcebook at Fordham University. Site contains many letters between the main characters (Becket, Henry II, Pope Alexander and others) dated 1165 to 1172 on all aspects of the crisis.
- www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/NORbeckett.htm
Thomas Becket (website) – from Spartacus Educational (UK)
- www.historylearningsite.co.uk/thomas_becket.htm
Thomas Becket (website) – from the History Learning Site (UK)
- www.britainexpress.com/History/Henry_II_and_Thomas_a_Becket.htm
Henry II and Thomas Beckett (website) – from Britain Express, an educational site in the UK
- www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/becket.htm
The Murder of Thomas Becket (website) – from Eyewitness to History. Contains secondary sources imbedded in the narrative of the website. This is a great way to incorporate primary sources into the regular classroom. Highly recommended for students and teachers.
- www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/becket_01.shtml
Becket, the Church and Henry II (website) – from the BBC
- www.schoolhistory.co.uk/lessons/becket/becket.htm
Henry II and Thomas Becket Game (website) – from Schoolhistory (UK). Outstanding online game where students decide what King Henry II should do in response to specific situations presented. This game is more difficult than it first appears. At the end, perhaps Henry was in a “no-win” situation? Highly recommended for students and teachers at all levels.
- www.kgv.edu.hk/history/Y7/Medieval/Becket/Thbec.htm
The Murder of Thomas Becket in 1170 (website)
- www.broadwater.surrey.sch.uk/History/7lessons/Blood%20on%20the%20Cathedral%20Floor.ppt
Blood on the Cathedral Floor (PowerPoint). From the history department at Broadwater School (UK). Specifically designed for secondary school students in the United Kingdom, this PowerPoint does a great job of taking kids through the Henry II / Thomas Becket crisis. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVysavFkXsQ
The Murder of Thomas Becket (video) – 10-minute video that does a good job of explaining why Becket was murdered. Recommended for classes that need a shorter video.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtJX0430bQw
Cathedral – Murder at Canterbury (video) – BBC video. 60-minute video that is probably too long for most in-class showings, but it is well worth it. This BBC documentary does a great job of explaining the relationship between Henry II and Becket. Highly recommended for both students and teachers.

Background Information

- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Becket
Thomas Becket – Wikipedia article
- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Becket_controversy
Becket Controversy – Wikipedia article
- www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_II_of_England
Henry II of England – Wikipedia article
- www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/country_profile
On the Road: Britain (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel
- www.passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/the_united_kingdom/canterbury_cathedral
On the Road: Canterbury Cathedral – from Passports Educational Travel

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-chaucer-canterbury-tales
Medieval England – Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/magna-carta-of-1215
Medieval England – Magna Carta of 1215
- www.passports.com/lesson-plans/england/norman-invasion-of-1066
Medieval England – Norman Invasion of 1066
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-richard-the-lionheart
Medieval England – Richard the Lionheart
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-robin-hood
Medieval England – Robin Hood
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/medieval-france-avignon-papacy
Medieval France – Avignon Papacy 1309-1378
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-renaissance-venice-the-doge
Medieval / Renaissance Venice – The Doge
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-europe-black-death-of-1348
Medieval Europe – Bubonic Plague: Europe’s Black Death
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-inferno
Medieval Europe – Dante’s Inferno
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-paradiso
Medieval Europe – Dante’s Paradiso
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-purgatorio
Medieval Europe – Dante’s Purgatorio
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-basilica-di-san-marco
Medieval Venice – Basilica di San Marco
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-marco-polo-and-his-travels
Medieval Venice – Marco Polo and his Travels
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-fourth-crusade
Medieval Venice – The Fourth Crusade 1202-1204
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/scandinavia/vikings-western-exploration-of-the-north-atlantic
Vikings and Sagas: Erik the Red and Leif Erikson
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/spain/al-andalus-islamic-spain
Al-Andalus – Islamic Spain
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-constantinople-hagia-sophia
Byzantine Empire – Constantinople: Church of the Holy Wisdom
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-constantinople
Byzantine Empire – Constantinople: the New Rome
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-fall-of-constantinople-1453
Byzantine Empire – Fall of Constantinople 1453
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-great-schism-of-1054
Great Schism of 1054 – splitting the Christian Church into East and West

Key Terms

- Archbishop of Canterbury
- Canterbury Cathedral
- Chancellor
- Church / State relations
- Henry II
- Thomas Becket

