
INTRODUCTION

On the fifth day of Christmas 1170, the morrow of the festival of the Holy Innocents, that is to say, Tuesday, 29 December, Thomas, archbishop of Canterbury, primate of the whole of England and legate of the Holy See, was murdered in his cathedral church by four noble knights from the household of his lord and former patron and friend, King Henry II. He had just celebrated what was thought to be his fiftieth birthday. The horror which the killing inspired and the miraculous cures performed at his tomb transfigured the victim into one of the most popular saints in the late-medieval calendar and made Canterbury one of the greatest pilgrim shrines in the West. The modern Lourdes, although doubtless better organized, gives some idea of medieval Canterbury with its phials of water tintured, if faintly, with the blood of the martyr, and its highly charged atmosphere, a combination of the pathetic hopes of the sick and the jollity of the holiday-makers.

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* kept the saint's memory green after the Reformation, and the drama has attracted distinguished modern playwrights. The saint's legend has, of course, changed with the times. Each age has reinterpreted the events in accordance with its own preoccupations. But one constant has been a conviction that not only were great principles involved but also great men; and no one has ever doubted the magnificent courage of the archbishop, even if it has also been occasionally the cause of some regret.

In the 1170s, however, popular enthusiasm for the new saint concealed a variety of views among those who had been more involved in the events. Some of his enemies thought that he had got what he deserved. Many sympathizers felt relief as well as sorrow when they heard the news. Thomas's had not been a model life; his notorious faults had given a handle to his enemies and been a trial to his friends; and the transformation of a supremely worldly man into a stiff-necked prelate, a trouble-maker, who in the end seemed almost to invite martyrdom, was for some hard to forgive, for many hard to understand. It was difficult to apportion responsibility

for the tragedy, since even the saint's greatest friends were not prepared, for a variety of reasons, to put the blame squarely and exclusively on the king. Herbert of Bosham, one of Thomas's most loyal and intemperate servants, in his *Liber Melorum* (Book of Melodies), which he appended to his history of the events, paid a great tribute to Henry, whose grandeur was spotted only by this unaccountable feud and disaster. Some observers doubted whether there was sufficient cause for martyrdom, many were aware that Thomas, even if he had not courted death, had done nothing to avoid it. Unlike John of Salisbury and William of Canterbury, he had not fled from persecution.¹

But these hesitations were lost in a growing stream of popular enthusiasm for the martyr. The murder was so shocking and the case of such interest that at least ten men were inspired to write about it within a decade of the event, followed by two or three more, including Herbert of Bosham, in the 1180s. John of Salisbury described the martyrdom in a letter (*Ex insperato*) written immediately afterwards to a former colleague in Archbishop Theobald's court, John of Canterbury, then bishop of Poitiers and later archbishop of Lyons, a letter which became widely known and was familiar to most of the biographers. And he probably soon followed with a brief Life. Others who were in the cathedral on that calamitous day, such as Edward Grim, William of Canterbury, William fitzStephen and Benedict of Peterborough, were no doubt encouraged to write because of their participation. But it was, above all, their witness to the miracles, that erupted so dramatically, and the papal canonization of March 1173 which required them and others to compose Passions and Lives. This spate of almost instant hagiographical writing was unprecedented. And it was still running strongly at the Jubilee in 1220, when Archbishop Stephen Langton translated Thomas's relics into a new shrine and was presented with a copy of Roger of Crowland's version, completed in 1213, of Elias of Evesham's composite life of the saint, *Quadriologus*, which he had fashioned in 1198–9. This literary corpus is also, in its use of documentary evidence and dominant historical tone, almost unique for the Middle Ages. But, because of the very nature of the genre, its coverage of Thomas's career is unbalanced.

Most of the biographers, men closely connected either with the convent of Christ Church or with Thomas as archbishop, who form what can be called the Canterbury group, not only concentrate upon the eight years after 1162, the term of his prelacy, but also pay particular attention to his quarrel with the king, culminating in the martyrdom. At the centre of popular interest was the *passio*. The posthumous miracles – unusually, there were no *ante-mortem* signs – were also of great interest to some of the memorialists. Thomas had passed from death unto life; and this heavenly life with Christ was more important than his previous existence in the vales of sorrow and

misfortune. Only one writer, William fitzStephen, one of Thomas's clerks when royal chancellor who accompanied him to Canterbury, made a serious attempt to describe the first forty-two years of his subject's life. Moreover, none of the biographers paid much attention to Thomas as archdeacon of Canterbury, for everyone was familiar with the satirical question, 'Is it possible for an archdeacon to be saved?' The archbishop's exile is poorly treated. This insufficiency, however, is more than remedied by the large collections of correspondence, assembled as a complementary exercise, which, likewise ignoring the early years, are concerned almost exclusively with the exile and the quarrel in all its wordy ramifications.

Nevertheless, although the Canterbury group omitted most of the story which in their eyes did least credit to the saint, they were painfully aware of it and accepted that it was the inescapable background to what they wanted to dwell upon. Their story was meaningless without a knowledge of the other. It was Thomas's earlier career in the world which made his episcopacy particularly difficult, and it was only his change of character, his being 'born again', which turned him into a saint and martyr. The earliest biographers could assume that their readers would know the background well. They had no need to labour it.

The three writers who knew him best were his clerks, John of Salisbury, William fitzStephen and Herbert of Bosham. The first, possibly to spare himself pain, possibly because of embarrassment over his behaviour at the martyrdom, but possibly only because his *Vita* was merely an introduction to a projected collection of 'Becket correspondence', wrote a short, cool and careful account which from the start was considered inadequate. The second, a Londoner, although devoted to Thomas, sympathetic to his cause and staunch at the martyrdom, reverted to royal service, both in 1164 and 1171. An obvious outsider to the Canterbury set, he produced by far the best account of the externals of Thomas's career, straightforward, factual and anecdotally informative. It is significant that his work, indeed his very existence, is ignored by all writers from John of Salisbury to Herbert of Bosham, most of whom had known him well. The last, whose background was in some ways similar to fitzStephen's, was Thomas's inseparable companion, teacher and friend after 1162. The most intimate with the saint and the most involved in his aspirations, he wrote a Life which is complementary to fitzStephen's, garrulous, sometimes tedious, the searchings of a disappointed old man who found the recollection of these amazing events both puzzling and painful. By allowing his pen to record his wandering thoughts he was now and then uncomfortably indiscreet. Even his theological excursions can tail into a blundering revelation.

As the several biographers are frequently referred to in the following chapters, and their order of writing and inter-relationships are important

for evaluating their evidence, their names and some of the most relevant information about them are listed here and illustrated opposite.

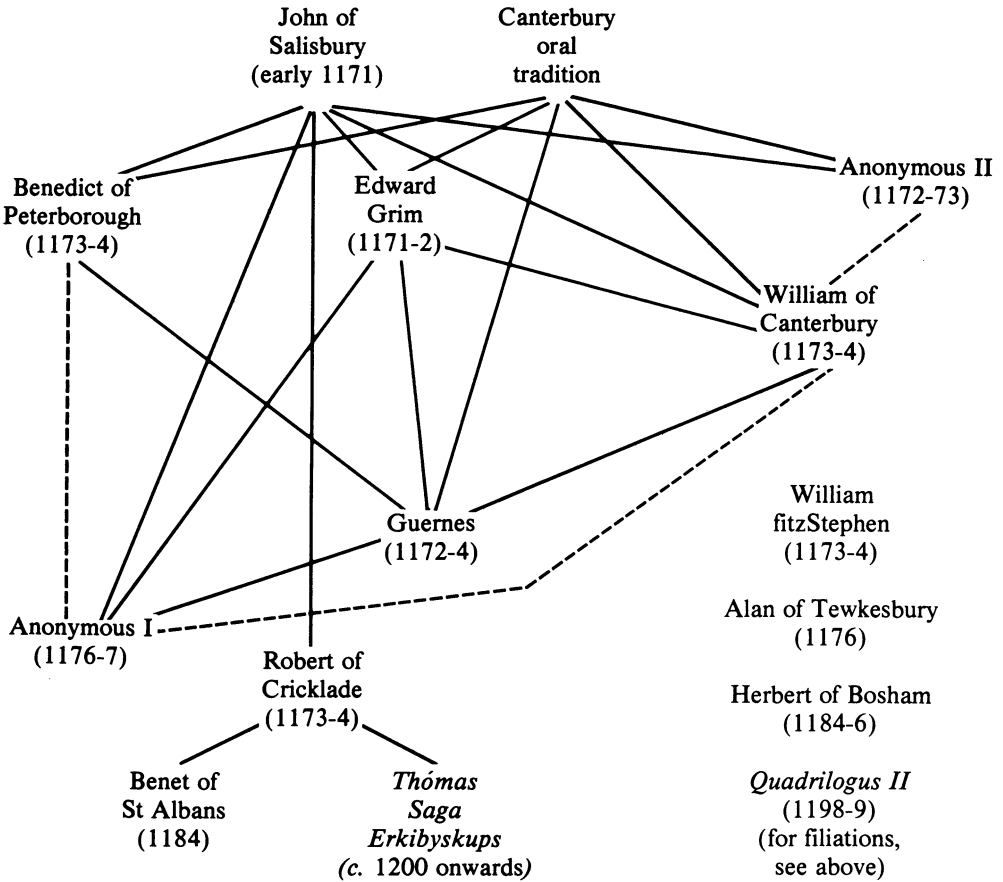
1. **John of Salisbury**, the famous scholar and author, a prolific letter writer, who served popes as well as Archbishops Theobald and Thomas as clerk. A candid friend of the last, in exile from 1164 to 1170 and, although not in the archbishop's company, much involved in his affairs, he rejoined him before the return to Canterbury in 1170, and took refuge behind the altars during the murder. He wrote his epistolary account of the death immediately after the event and his very brief Life probably shortly afterwards, although many historians have adhered to the inherently improbable theory that the latter was produced in 1173–6 and was almost entirely derivative. In 1176 he became bishop of Chartres and died in 1180. *BHL* 8178, 8180; *Mats.* ii. 301.

2. **Edward Grim**, a clerk and master, born at Cambridge, and probably the deprived rector of Saltwood, Kent,³ who returned from Normandy in time to be present at the martyrdom, where he behaved heroically. He was dead by 1186. He wrote an ill-organized Life, based on personal knowledge and Canterbury information, but with often hazy detail, in 1171–2. It became one of the most influential. *BHL* 8182; *Mats.* ii. 353.

3. **Anonymous II**, sometimes known as 'of Lambeth' after the provenance of the only manuscript of the work, and clearly connected with the diocese of London.⁴ An alleged but unlikely witness to the murder, who later became a monk at Christ Church, Canterbury, he wrote his Life in 1172–3. Traces of a prejudice against the archbishop, no doubt originating in London, appear in his work. *BHL* 8187–8; *Mats.* iv. 80.

4. **Benedict of Peterborough**, monk of Christ Church, prior in 1175 and abbot of Peterborough 1177–93; present in the church at the time of the martyrdom. The first custodian of the shrine, he made the most primitive, and eventually the most influential, collection of miracles. The Passion he wrote in 1173–4, to serve as an introduction to this, is known only from fragments embedded in *Quadriologus*, a later compilation. *BHL* 8170–1; *Mats.* ii. 1.

5. **William of Canterbury**, monk of Christ Church and ordained deacon by Thomas in 1170; present at the martyrdom until blows were struck. In June 1172, as Benedict's colleague or successor at the shrine, he began to edit the existing records of miracles and add to them. His collection was presented by the convent to Henry II, at the king's request, probably



Key

- confirmed filiation
- - - - - suspected filiation

The main relationships between the early biographers

in the autumn of 1174 after the royal penance at the tomb. During the same period, most likely in 1173-4, William wrote a full-scale Life, which is particularly valuable for his account of the events of December 1170 in which he was closely involved. *BHL* 8184-5; *Mats.* i. 1.

These five writers, all, except the first two, Canterbury monks, were writing at roughly the same time and creating and transmitting the story which must have been told countless times to pilgrims at the shrine. It looks as though William of Canterbury, who may have read Anonymous II, reorganized and particularized Edward Grim's account; but all five works are both inter-related in some way and also in part independent contributions.

6. **William fitzStephen**, by his own account, Thomas's fellow citizen (of London), clerk and friend, drafter (*dictator*) in his chancery, his subdeacon when he celebrated in chapel and his reader of letters and documents when he sat on the bench, sometimes, when required, an advocate in his court.⁵ As he tells us more than the others about Thomas as royal chancellor and made his peace with the king when his master went into exile, it is most likely that he had also been with Thomas in the royal chancery before 1162. He rejoined Thomas probably towards the end of 1170 and was one of the few actually at hand when the archbishop was killed. He may then have returned to the king, for a William fitzStephen was sheriff of Gloucester from 1171 to 1189 and an itinerant justice from 1175 to 1188, a second 'apostacy' which would help to explain the suppression of his name and role in Thomas's life by all the other early biographers. He wrote his *Vita* in 1173-4, independently of the others and with a quite different slant. For example, he drew on the Gilbert Foliot collection of letters instead of the Canterbury archives. *BHL* 8176-7; *Mats.* iii. 1.

7. **Guernes of Pont-Sainte-Maxence**, a vagrant clerk from that place in the Isle de France, on the River Oise, near Senlis, a *trouvère* who wrote two versions of the Life in French verse (*romans*). Only the second, finished by the end of 1174, after a stay at Canterbury and a visit to Thomas's sister Mary at Barking, is extant. Essentially a translation of Edward Grim, sometimes modified or amplified by reference to William of Canterbury and Benedict of Peterborough, and enriched by personal reflections and interesting detail, it is firmly in the Canterbury tradition. Ed. E. Walberg (Lund, 1922).

8. **Robert of Cricklade**, a master and canon of Cirencester, prior of St Frideswide, an Augustinian convent at Oxford, from 1141 to 1174, he wrote,

in 1173–4, probably because the saint cured his bad leg, a Life which has unfortunately disappeared, possibly because it was too favourable to the king. It was, however, one of the sources of Benet of St Albans and of the Icelandic Sagas, and its possible contents have been reconstructed by Margaret Orme, ‘A reconstruction of Robert of Cricklade’s *Vita et Miracula S. Thomae Cantuariensis*’, *Analecta Bollandiana*, 84 (1966), 379–98. Among Robert’s sources was John of Salisbury.⁶

9. **Anonymous I**, an unknown clerk who served Thomas in exile and was priested by him. He is sometimes identified as Roger, monk of Pontigny (and the editors of *Councils and Synods*, p. 843n., accept it as probable); but in his Life, composed in 1176–7, he wrote little of Thomas’s stay there and drew on several of his Canterbury predecessors.⁷ *BHL* 8183; *Mats.* iv. 1.

10. **Alan of Tewkesbury**, an English master who became a canon of Benevento before returning to Canterbury about 1174 and becoming prior in 1179. He was abbot of Tewkesbury from 1186 to 1202. His main work was his ‘definitive edition’ of the Becket correspondence (first edition, comprising 535 items, assembled in 1174–6), to which he prefaced John of Salisbury’s *Vita*, supplemented by a contribution of his own (*Explanatio*), written in 1176.⁸ He may have owed some information to Lombard of Piacenza, one of Thomas’s *eruditi*, who became archbishop of Benevento in 1171. *BHL* 8179, 8181; *Mats.* ii. 299, 323.

11. **Lansdowne Anonymous (III)**, an anonymous writer, probably from the circle of Odo, prior of Canterbury, who gives an original account of some consequences of the murder up to October 1172, when the MS, B.L.Lansdowne 398, breaks off owing to damage. *BHL* 8201; *Mats.* iv. 158–85.

12. **Benet of St Albans**, monk of St Albans under Abbot Simon (1167–83), he wrote, about 1184, a Life in French verse based in part on Robert of Cricklade’s lost work. Ed. F. Michel, *Chronique des ducs de Normandie* (Docs. inédits sur l’histoire de France, Paris, 1844), iii. 461–509, 619–25.

13. **Herbert of Bosham**, a pupil of Peter Lombard at Paris, a Hebraist, theologian and notable scholar; one of Thomas’s clerks as chancellor (before 1157) and his confidential agent, teacher, counsellor and friend throughout his archiepiscopacy. His constant companion and the only biographer to give a firsthand account of the exile, to his undying regret he missed the martyrdom because Thomas had sent him on a mission to France. He wrote

his History well after most of the others in 1184–6 and sometimes echoes or indirectly answers them. Often he runs parallel to William fitzStephen. *BHL* 8190–1; *Mats.* iii. 155.

14. ***Quadrilogus II***, a conflation of the Lives by John of Salisbury, Benedict of Peterborough, William of Canterbury, Alan of Tewkesbury and Herbert of Bosham made in 1198–9 by Elias of Evesham at Crowland Abbey. The thirteenth-century expansion, *Quadrilogus I* (*BHL* 8200), contains also extracts from an interpolated version of Edward Grim, including the story of Thomas's Syrian mother, and from the Life by William fitzStephen. *Quadrilogus II* was one of the components of Roger of Crowland's Life and Letters of Thomas completed in 1213. *BHL* 8195; *Mats.* iv. 266.

15. ***Thómas Saga Erkibyskups***. Robert of Cricklade's *Vita* was translated into Icelandic c.1200, probably by the priest Berg Gunnsteinsson, and later Icelandic versions were expanded from other English Latin sources, including John of Salisbury's *Vita* and Benedict of Peterborough's *Miracula*, and the Norwegian translation of *Quadrilogus II*. The only extant complete version was made c.1320–50.⁹ Ed. E. Magnússon (Rolls ser., 1875–83).

Some of the events of Thomas's life are also featured by the chroniclers of the period. The first half of Henry II's reign is surprisingly obscure. The only current recorder of the events is the annalist Robert of Torigni (de Monte), monk of Bec from 1128 to 1154 and then abbot of Mont St Michel until his death in 1186, who continued the *Gesta Normannorum Ducum*, begun by Dudo at the end of the tenth century. A strong supporter of his patron Henry II, he chose largely to ignore the 'Becket affair', but does supply some important dates.¹⁰ Roger, parson of Howden (Hovedene) in Yorkshire, a protégé of Hugh of le Puiset, bishop of Durham, and a royal clerk, started keeping annals about 1169. He put his first version, misleadingly known as *Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi Benedicti Abbatis*, into its final form in 1192–3 and then absorbed it into his *Chronica*, which were written between that date and 1201–2, when he died.¹¹ Both versions provide some details of the archbishop's career unrecorded elsewhere.

Ralf of Diss (Diceto) in Norfolk, archdeacon of Middlesex in 1152 and dean of St Paul's in 1180, closely observed the English ecclesiastical scene, but, like Robert of Torigni, because of his admiration of the king refused to get much involved in the great quarrel in his *Abbreviationes Chronicorum* and *Ymagines Historiarum*, written in the 1180s and 1190s.¹² William, canon of Newburgh in North Yorkshire, who wrote his substantially derivative *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* at the very end of his life (1136–98), has always been highly regarded for his veracity, common sense and independence

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of mind.¹³ Gervase of Canterbury, the only one of these chroniclers to give the archbishop considerable attention, entered Christ Church and was ordained by Thomas shortly after 1162 and was present at the martyr's burial. But he composed his account, as he tells us, after John of Salisbury, Benedict of Peterborough, William of Canterbury and Herbert of Bosham had made their contributions and Alan of Tewkesbury had collected the correspondence.¹⁴