



Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

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Module tutor: Janet Burton Assignment due date: 13 Dec. 21		
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 Thomas Becket HPMS7006
 Assessment 2 – ‘Lives of Becket’
 12 December 2021

At least ten ‘Lives’ of Thomas Becket were written in the aftermath of Becket’s murder on 29 December 1170. It is likely that the number of biographies exceeds ten as some have been lost or in fragmentary form.¹ It is noteworthy that so many wrote on Thomas in such a short period of time. Of the ten ‘Lives’, nine were written within seven years after his murder. Although there are minor discrepancies in detail, there is more agreement among the authors than not. The impetus for so much written material was the dramatic murder and subsequent canonization of Thomas. Duggan argues that ‘all [biographers] were interpreting his [Thomas] career in the light of its dramatic ending’.² Edward Grim, one of the biographers, not only witnessed the murder upfront but also was injured in the attack. His account is fascinating in that it delivers the blow-by-blow details of the event. Because Grim is the only biographer who was part of the attack and with Thomas when he died, the other biographers present hid in safety in the cathedral, one can argue that his account of the murder is the most reliable and valid. It also has an influence upon later biographers, particularly Guernes of Pont-Sainte-Maxence.

Edward Grim earned his place in history by his heroic defense of Thomas during the attack in Canterbury Cathedral. He is often depicted in stain glass and other artwork as the cross-bearer for Thomas on that day. Grim, too, received a serious blow to the arm from one of the knights’ swords in attempting to protect Thomas and remained with Thomas while he died. Although Grim’s name and account are well known, Grim’s own life is less well known. It is

¹ Michael Staunton, *Thomas Becket and his Biographers*, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006) p. 1.

² Anne Duggan, *Thomas Becket*, (London: Arnold Publishers, 2004) p. 4.

unclear whether Grim was one of Thomas's inner circle or confidantes as some of the other biographers, such as John of Salisbury and Herbert of Bosham, were. However, Herbert of Bosham, writing fourteen years after the murder, refers to Grim as one of Thomas's 'learned companions'.³ Certainly, one can conclude that Grim knew of Thomas as a national and international figure and may have been familiar with him. Herbert could have placed Grim as a companion in light of the murder and Grim's influential 'Life'. Duggan refers to Grim as 'an Oxford clerk, who had just been ordained priest by Thomas'.⁴ While Guy asserts 'He was a visitor to Canterbury who happened to find himself at vespers in the cathedral on the day Becket was murdered'.⁵ Barlow provides more information with his description of Grim as 'a clerk and master, born at Cambridge, and probably the deprived rector of Saltwood, Kent'.⁶ This is a curious note in the relationship of Grim to Thomas. Barlow suggests that Grim may have been a casualty of Henry's in the beginning of the dispute.

It is significant that, when Henry confiscated Henry of Essex's lands after his defeat in the ordeal by battle in April, he also retained the honour of Saltwood which the constable had held of the archbishop. One consequence, although possibly not until 1164-5, was the expulsion of the rector of Saltwood, Master Edward Grim, the archbishop's future biographer.⁷

If, in fact, Grim was the 'deprived rector', he certainly would have known about the dispute between Henry II and the Archbishop. So, we can surmise that Grim was some type of religious, whether a rector and/or a priest, and not a Canterbury monk.

³ Stauton, *Thomas Becket and his Biographers*, p. 29. Stauton cites *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury*, ed. J.C. Robertson and J.B. Sheppard, 7 vols. RS 67 (London: 1875-85). Hereafter *MTB*.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 2.

⁵ John Guy, *Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel, Victim*, (London: Penguin Books, 2013) p. xv.

⁶ Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) p. 4.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 89.

Grim is counted among the ‘Canterbury group’ of authors. It is not clear if he was actually in Canterbury when he wrote his account. This designation may be due to his influence on subsequent ‘Lives’, particularly Guernes, Benedict and William of Canterbury, and Anonymous I. In addition, Grim would have been exposed to the oral tradition and the international sensation in the aftermath of the murder.

Grim’s ‘Life’ was an early account of the murder. The original was thought to be written 1171-72, soon after John of Salisbury’s letter *Ex insperato*, which was written in early 1171. It is contended that Grim would have written his original account prior to Henry’s negotiated peace at Avranches in May 1172. Thus, Grim writes prior to Thomas’s canonization; however, the cult of Becket had already emerged. Staunton argues that Grim’s early account shows hesitancy as it was written early in the development of the cult.⁸ Regardless of hesitancy, Grim does employ hagiographic language in his ‘Life’ such as ‘soldier of God and the martyr of the Savior’ during Thomas’s exchange with the knights.⁹ In this example, Grim is recounting how Thomas demands that the knights let all others go. This would be in direct comparison to Jesus’s arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. Grim states “” If it is me you seek, you allow these to depart””.¹⁰ Although the Christ comparison is not as pronounced as the John of Salisbury account, it is clearly included in Grim’s description of the murder. Grim weaves reflection on Thomas’s actions and countenance in facing his death. In addition, Grim uses the hagiographical device of ‘omens’ surrounding the birth of a saint.¹¹ This device is not unusual in the Middle Ages in

⁸ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and his Biographers*, p. 8

⁹ *MTB*, 2, 80 p. 436 ‘Decuit plane Ducis sui militem martyrem Salvatoris inhaerere vestigiis, qui cum quaereretur ab impiis.’

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 436 “”Si me,” inquit, “quaeritis, sinite hos abire.””

¹¹ Staunton, *Thomas Becket and his Biographers*, p. 30.

hagiography of saints. One can conclude that clearly Grim is making a case for martyrdom and canonization for Thomas.

The strength of Grim's account lies in both his portrayal of the Thomas's election to the archbishopric, the emergence of the dispute, the Council of Westminster, Clarendon, and council of Northampton. Thus, the years of 1160 to 1164. Grim examines the change in Thomas upon consecration and may be one source for scholars that argue that Thomas became a 'new man'. Its weaknesses lie in his account of the years prior to Thomas's ascension to archbishop and early years, which lack detail. In addition, his description of the years in exile are described as uneven, confused, and hazy.¹² Staunton goes on to assert that Grim would have drawn upon Thomas's letters from the years in exile, particularly correspondence in 1166.¹³ However, Grim's accuracy of events and dates during this time are questionable. Regardless of Grim's hazy details of Thomas's early life and exile, his discussion of the dispute between Henry and Thomas are thorough and comprehensive.

Grim's greatest contribution and impact is his detailed account of the murder. As an event that Grim, himself, not only witnessed but also was part of, it would have been traumatic and seared in his mind. This would have been a life changing event for Edward Grim. All of Europe would have been discussing the horrendous murder and Grim lived to provide the exact report. It is the murder that is the reason why he wrote his account.

Although his Latin is not as polished as some of the other biographers, such as John of Salisbury, the description is powerful. Grim places the reader in the Cathedral in his shoes. When reading it, one feels as if you are standing there, hearing the clank of the swords and the

¹² Ibid, p. 31. Also see Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, p. 4.

¹³ Ibid, p. 31.

shouts of the knights. The angry exchange between Thomas and Fitz Urse and his depiction of Rainaldus's 'red-hot' rage as he wielded that sword against Thomas's head is incredibly vivid.¹⁴ He follows this with how the knights set upon Thomas and how Grim was injured in the attack. He tells us that the clerics and monks fled as he held Thomas in his arms and Thomas prayed as he suffered blows to his head. He completes the scene with Hugh Mauclerc's sickening callousness of scattering Thomas's brain on the floor and say 'Let us depart from here, knights, he will not rise anymore'.¹⁵ It is this testimony that allows us to relive the horror of the murder 850 years later.

¹⁴ *MTB*, 2, p. 436. 'Miles vero pro repulsion furore terribili totus incanduit, ensemque vibrans contra sacrum verticem'.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 2, p. 436 'Abeamus hinc, milites, iste ulterius no resurget'.