

Analysis of one of the authors of the 'Lives of Becket'

John Cooper-Hammond

Student N^o: 2022129

Chosen writer: John of Salisbury.



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Jean de Salisbury enseignant la philosophie, miniature de frontispice du Polycraticon de Jean de Salisbury.¹



John of Salisbury²

As I live about 25 miles from Old Sarum with the Salisbury diocese, I have chosen to look at John of Salisbury. Gilson³ says that John was the 'central figure of English learning ... a mind... so finely tempered, so rich, so ripe and so exquisitely cultured that its presence, when we reflect on it, elevates the image of the whole epoch'.⁴ However, John was born in the small Wiltshire community of Old Sarum, clustered round an Iron Age hillfort with an imposed Norman castle and cathedral, and his initial education was from a local parish priest. He later studied in France under the great masters of the age⁵, he later served in the Papal court and met Nicholas Breakspear [Pope Adrian IV] – he notes '... Pope Adrian IV, to whom I was bound in closest friendship⁶, and stayed with him

¹ Illustration taken from Wikimedia Commons at: [File:Polycraticon de Jean de Salisbury - BSG Ms1145 f3r \(Jean de Salisbury enseignant\).jpeg - Wikimedia Commons](#)

² Illustration taken from the Spartacus Educational website at: [John of Salisbury \(spartacus-educational.com\)](#)

³ M. Gilson, *Histoire de la philosophie médiévale*, Paris 1943

⁴ As translated by David Knowles, 1962, *The evolution of medieval thought*, London p 140

⁵ Such as : Abelard, Robert de Melun, Guillaume de Conche, Bernard de Chartres, Robert Pullen & Gilbert de la Porrée.

⁶ Anon. An Anecdote relating to John of Salisbury. The British magazine, or, Monthly repository for gentlemen & ladies, 1760-1767; Sep 1762; 3 p. 492

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for almost three months...⁷ John moved in the higher echelons of the church and was even commended to Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury by St Bernard of Clairvaux himself. At Canterbury he joined a group canonists, theologians and men of letters that have been described as a proto university.⁸ It was in this group that John developed his friendship with his fellow clerk Thomas Becket. It was during this time he wrote the *Metalogicon*, concerning the *trivium* of liberal arts⁹, and the *Policraticus*, referred to as the first medieval exposition of political theory. Both works were dedicated to Becket who had by this time been made Chancellor by Henry II. When Becket replaced Theobald, after his demise, John became one of Thomas' eruditi; and when the archbishop made the liberty of the church his particular cause, John became his faithful supporter whilst retaining his own independent of mind.¹⁰ So much so that he too was exiled as a dangerous influence.¹¹ John's attitude about the church and the king is illustrated in the *Policraticus*, where he states that the knighthood is ordained for the purpose: '... to protect the church, to attack infidelity, to reverence the priesthood...'¹²

Knowles point out that during the six years of his exile, 'his letters are one of the most valuable sources for the history of the struggle between archbishop and king.'¹³ Also during his exile in France John produced his *Historia Pontificalis*, a description of the Papal Court of the time. Knowles further notes that: '... John of Salisbury in his writings and letters gives us pen-pictures of the great men he had known that are unsurpassed in their *finesse* an in their balance. ...'¹⁴

John returned to Canterbury along with Becket and was present when the archbishop was first confronted by the four knights in his lodgings and as Knowles notes John '...remarked that the archbishop was the only one of the party who seemed to wish to die for the sake of dying. ...'¹⁵ This may have been the reason that John was in conversation with Thomas immediately before the assassination.¹⁶ He was also in the group that accompanied the archbishop into the cathedral, however, when the knights confronted Thomas in the cathedral and were told by him to let his people go free, indeed, Peters asserts that John,

⁷ *Policraticus* II p 67-8 cited in R.W. Southern, 1993, *The making of the Middle Ages* London: Pimlico p 148

⁸ Knowles op cit p136

⁹ For a full analysis see B. Gilchrist, 2013, *The Metalogicon of John of Salisbury*, Doctoral thesis

¹⁰ Lynn K. Barker, 1990, MS Bodleian Canon Pat. Lat 131 and a lost Lactantius of John of Salisbury, Albion 22.1

¹¹ Knowles op cit p137

¹² *Policraticus* II p 23 cited in Southern op cit p 111

¹³ Knowles op cit p 137

¹⁴ Knowles, 1970, *Thomas Becket*, London p 33

¹⁵ Knowles, 1962 op cit p 137

¹⁶ Knowles 1969 op cit p 167

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...'offers the most elaborate version of the prohibition, perhaps to justify his own flight from the scene immediately afterward'.¹⁷ John having fled the scene, leaving the archbishop, although present was not a close eye-witness to the assassination. he was close enough to collect two phials of Thomas' blood, which he later took to Chartres¹⁸ in a specially created reliquary.¹⁹ As Barlow points out the murder of Becket was, ... 'so shocking and the case of so much interest that at least ten men were inspired to write about it within a decade'²⁰... John of Salisbury was, probably, the first when he wrote a descriptive letter to his, and Becket's²¹, friend John of Canterbury, Bishop of Poitiers in 1171. McGurk comments that he was, ... 'the outstanding scholar of his age, memorable in his elegant writings for the light he threw on so many of the more important figures in church and state of the second half of the twelfth century. ...Throughout his work there is a noteworthy common sense, a subtle humour, a deep regard for human values, a tenacious loyalty... Benedict of Peterborough thought him 'a man of much learning, great eloquence and profound wisdom''.²² A close friend of Becket for some 15 years, a man of culture, an established author and intellect, a prolific letter writer, he would appear to be the ideal person²³ to write a definitive life of Thomas. But this did not prove to be the case.

Although in his letter, circulated in France, John describes Thomas' death in terms of an almost stereotypical martyrdom, within a year he produced a short *Vita et Passio* which sets out the martyrdom in the 'context of salvation history'²⁴.

Biography was not the purpose of this writing, and his 'Life' was hagiographic in nature. Morris and Peters are quite blunt in stating that his ... 'manipulation of the truth was ... blatant' and that his artistic license had 'very significant implications'.²⁵ He was reinforcing the martyrdom and sacrilege of the assassin's acts. John asked for permission to venerate Thomas ... 'without Papal

¹⁷ Timothy Peters, 1994, 'An Ecclesiastical Epic: Garnier de Pont-Ste-Maxine's "Vie de Saint Thomas le Martyr"', in *Mediaevistik*, 1994, Vol. 7 (1994), Bern: Peter Lang AG p 181

¹⁸ Colin Morris & Peter Roberts (eds), 2002, *Pilgrimage; the English experience*, Cambridge: CUP p 49.

¹⁹ Joseph Breck, 1918, 'A Reliquary of Saint Thomas Becket made for John of Salisbury' in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Oct 1918, Vol 13 N^o: 10, New York pp 220-224.

²⁰ Frank Barlow 1986, *Thomas Becket*, London Guild Publishing p2.

²¹ John Guy, 2013, *Thomas Becket*, London, Penguin Books p xvii.

²² J.J.N. McGurk, 1975, 'John of Salisbury' *History Today* vol. 25 issue 1 January 1975 pp 40 – 47.

²³ Michael Staunton, 2001, *The Lives of Thomas Becket*, Manchester: Manchester University Press p 7.

²⁴ Anne Duggan, 2004, *Thomas Becket*, London: Hodder Education p228.

²⁵ Morris & Peters op cit p 55.

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authorization' ...²⁶ even though this right was reserved to the papacy by Alexander III. However, Staunton says of John's 'Life', that it ... 'is in fact a disappointment, consisting of an expanded version of...' ²⁷ his letter. What he wrote was a character sketch²⁸ which emphasised Becket's spirituality, his martyrdom and as such outlined why he should be made a saint. Indeed in every later document he added, 'John, by divine condescension and the merits of Saint Thomas, humble minister of the Church of Chartres'.²⁹

Soon after Thomas's death John seems to have begun to put together a collection of letters, containing many that he written. In 1176 he was appointed as bishop of Chartres and his collecting was passed on to Alan of Tewkesbury, monk and then prior of Canterbury. The probability is that Alan took this work over when John was appointed bishop of Chartres in 1176. Along with John's collection and from Canterbury's own archives and other sources, over five hundred letters were sorted and collated. Alan added additional material like the text of the Constitutions of Clarendon. John of Salisbury's 'Life' is used as a prologue to the collection, but even here it is deemed insufficient as Alan added supplementary biographical details he had written.³⁰

However, it is Southern contention that it was likely that... 'the idea of telling the story of Becket's cause in the form of letters originally came from John' ... but were organised and explained by Alan. He continuous ... 'It was a brilliant idea, for in an age which knew nothing about analytical history it was probably the only way in which the story of Becket's aims and struggles could be told, between them they created a form of historical literature (of unequalled bulk or richness of detail).'³¹

Word count: 1,551

²⁶ D.J. Hall, *English Medieval Pilgrimage*, London Routledge p 151.

²⁷ Staunton op cit p 7.

²⁸ Mary de Chantal Biala OSF, 1945 *Annotated Translation of the Life of Saint Thomas Archbishop of Canterbury by John of Salisbury and Alan of Tewkesbury*, Master's thesis Loyola University, Chicago p ix.

²⁹ John Morris, 1859, *Life and martyrdom of St. Thomas*, London: Longmans p358.

³⁰ Margaret Harris, 1990, 'Alan of Tewkesbury and Thomas of Canterbury' in *Reading Medieval Studies* vol. 16 1990, Reading: RGCMS pp 39 – 53.

³¹ R W Southern, 1985, 'The monks of Canterbury & the murder of Archbishop Becket', *Canterbury: The Friends of Canterbury cathedral & the William Urry Memorial Trust* pp 14-15.

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