

SESSION 2

Henry II and Chancellor Thomas Becket, 1154–62

On a superficial level, Thomas's election as archbishop of Canterbury in May 1162 transformed a worldly courtier into a pious churchman. It is important to remember, however, that his election was only one stage in his association with Henry II. In this unit you should explore the background to the quarrel that took place after Thomas had become archbishop. Look at his experiences in government, his relationship with Henry II as his chancellor, and the nature of his connections and dealings with the church. We look as well at the factors that led to his elevation to the position of the most important churchman in the land.

Points to consider

- 1 What do we know about Thomas of London, his background and his education?
- 2 Thomas Becket as chancellor and the king's man: what role did he play in government?
- 3 What was the significance of the Battle Abbey case, and what does it reveal about Thomas's attitude to the church at this stage in his career?
- 4 Becket's election as archbishop: what was the motive of the king in appointing Thomas? What was the attitude of the bishops? What was the reaction of the Canterbury monks? Finally, what was the reaction of Thomas Becket?

SOURCES:

The relevant sources are printed in Staunton, *Lives of Becket*, pp. 40–69. The following extracts may also be useful:

From the Lives of Becket:

1 William fitz Stephen describes Becket's appointment as chancellor

After Henry II had been crowned king of the English at the hands of Archbishop Theobald, by the latter's recommendation and through his good offices, and also at the instigation of Henry, bishop of Winchester, Thomas was made the king's chancellor in preference to all others. Being a man of diligence and industry, revolving great matters in his mind and experienced in many and great affairs, he discharged the onerous duties and obligations of his office to the praise of God and the well being of the realm; so much so that it may be doubted whether he served the king with greater distinction and efficiency or to greater advantage in peace or in war.

2 Roger of Pontigny on the same

At that time [1154] various tumults arose in England accompanied by a disposition towards change. In the church of the realm there was no little anxiety, both on account of the king's youth and the marked hostility of his companions towards the rights and liberties of the church.

Nor was this anxiety misplaced, as the issue of events proved. The archbishop of Canterbury, therefore, uneasy about the present and apprehensive for the future, sought to find some remedy for the evils he feared to be imminent. It seemed to him that, if he could make Thomas a partner of the king's counsels, there might ensue there from the utmost peace and tranquillity for the English church. For he knew Thomas to be prudent and a man of high character, possessed of zeal for God according to his lights and striving with all his heart to preserve the freedom of the church. He therefore canvassed the opinions of Philip, bishop of Bayeux, and Arnulf, bishop of Lisieux, on whose advice the king chiefly relied in the early years of his reign.

3 Thomas as chancellor

The chancellor of England has so exalted a dignity that he is accounted next after the king in the realm. He has the custody of the royal seal, and seals his own orders with the obverse thereof. He is in charge of the order and arrangement of the royal chapel. He takes into his keeping all vacant archbishoprics, bishoprics, abbeys and baronies that fall into the king's hands. He takes his seat in all the king's councils and may enter there even when not summoned. Everything is signed by his clerk, who bears the royal seal, and everything is ordered by his advice . . .

. . . as I have heard from his confessor, Robert, the venerable canon of Merton, from the time that he became chancellor no excess ever stained his life. This too was a subject on which the king was continually tempting him night and day, but, as a man of prudence and the elect of God he kept his body pure and his loins girded. Like a wise man he was intent on the government of the kingdom and occupied with so many cares, both public and private, that he rarely yielded to such temptations. A modest man, indeed, was the chancellor, loathing all depravity and uncleanness, and when one of his clerks, Richard of Ambly, a man of high birth, had seduced the wife of a friend who had been long overseas, and persuaded her that her husband was dead, he removed him from his house and friendship, and caused him to be held prisoner in the Tower of London, where he remained for a long time in fetters . . .

. . . The chancellor . . . had about two hundred of his own household mounted on horseback, including knights, clerks, stewards, serjeants, squires, and sons of nobles bearing arms in his service, and all in fit array. These and all their train were resplendent in new and festive attire, each according to his rank. He himself had four and twenty changes of raiment . . . many garments of silk – almost all of which were to be given away and left overseas – every kind of fur, miniver, and skins, cloaks and carpets, too, like those which customarily adorn the chamber and bed of a bishop. He had with him hounds and birds of every kind, such as kings and rich men keep. In his equipage he also had eight wagons, each drawn by five horses, in size and strength like chargers. Each horse had its appointed groom, young and strong, girt in a new tunic and walking beside the wagon, and each wagon had its driver and guard. Two wagons bore nothing but beer . . . one wagon was used for the furniture of the chancellor's chapel, one for his chamber, one for his bursary, and another for his kitchen. Others carried different kinds of meat and drink, others cushions, bags containing nightgowns, bundles of clothes and baggage. Twelve pack horses and eight chests carried the Chancellor's gold and silver plate, his cups, platters, goblets, pitchers, basins, saltcellars, salvers and dishes. Other coffers and packing cases contained his money – more than enough for his daily expenses and presents – his clothes, some books and similar articles. One packhorse, in the van of the others, bore the sacred vessels of the chapel and the ornaments and books of the altar. **[William fitz Stephen]**

The Lives describe how Thomas is chosen as archbishop

- 4 When news [of Theobald's death] reached the king and the courtiers, straightaway all men indulged in conjecture. Some whispered and others openly affirmed that the chancellor was destined to be the successor of the dead archbishop. But the king wholly dissembled his intention save that the archbishopric was handed over to the care and custody of the chancellor, as was the custom with vacant bishoprics and abbacies. The chancellor however, from certain forebodings and conjectures, already had an inkling of the king's purpose . . . [a year or so later] The king called him aside and spoke to him private, saying, 'You do not fully comprehend the reason for your mission [to England]'. He then added, 'I intend to make you archbishop of Canterbury'. To this the chancellor replied, looking down and pointing with a smile to the gay attire that he was wearing, 'How religious, how saintly is the man you would appoint to that holy see and over so renowned and pious a body of monks. I know of a truth that, if God should so dispose it, you would speedily turn your face away from me, and the love which is now so great between us would be turned to bitter hatred. I know that you would make many demands, for already you presume overmuch in ecclesiastical affairs, and this I cannot bear with equanimity . . .'. **[Herbert of Bosham]**
- 5 [Thomas] had also learned to know the king's character and the wickedness and pertinacity of his officials, and how effective was the malice of informers at court. From these considerations he rightly drew the conclusion that, if he were to accept the post offered to him, he would lose either the favour of God or that of the king. For he could not cleave to God and at the same time obey the king's will, or give precedence to the laws of the saints without making an enemy of the king. **[John of Salisbury]**
- 6 The king believed that his design against the church could be most effectively carried out through Thomas, for experience had shown that he was most loyal to him in everything and well disposed to his wishes. [There follows a long description of the election]. Thomas himself from the first moment that his promotion was mooted, opposed the king's design by every means in his power. He knew full well that it was impossible to serve two masters, whose wills were so much at variance, and that whoever was made archbishop of Canterbury would be sure soon to offend either God or the king. **[Roger of Pontigny]**

Reading Guide

For all of these questions, see Duggan, *Thomas Becket*, pp. 8–32.

For (1) see particularly Knowles, *Thomas Becket*, pp. 1–9 and 21–9, Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, pp. 10–40. For the London in which Becket grew up, see Brooke and Keir, *London*, pp. 105–21.

For (2) see Knowles, *Thomas Becket*, 30–49 and Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, pp. 41–63.

For (3) see Warren, *Henry II*, pp. 429–32, Knowles, 'The Growth of Exemption', and *Thomas Becket*, pp. 44–5, Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, pp. 50–51.

For (4) see Knowles, *Thomas Becket*, pp. 50–58, and Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, pp. 64–73.

On the bishops of the controversy see Knowles, *Episcopal Colleagues*.