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SCHOOL

THOMAS BECKET REVISION GUIDE



KEY QUESTIONS

- Why was Thomas Becket important to Henry II?
- How did this event change the future relationship of the church with the monarchy?
- Do you think Henry II regretted the death of Thomas Becket?
- What were the consequences of Thomas Becket's death?
- Was Thomas Becket a saint or a sinner?

SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE

Summary of Events

- Thomas Becket was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162 by Henry II.
- He became a strong defender of the church and the rights of the clergymen, a contrary expectation Henry II had of him.
- With the church having great power over the monarchs, Thomas Becket enhanced this power further through help of the Pope of Rome.
- Becket also received great support from the people, enhancing his power. The Church was seen as the people's guardians.

- Any action taken against the Church was liable to divine punishment, even if the action came from the King.
- The Becket affair occurred after a heated argument between Becket and the King, resulting in Becket being beheaded at Canterbury Cathedral in 1170.
- Due to Becket being idolised, he was canonised immediately after his murder and despite Henry II doing penance to Becket's tomb in 1174, his reputation was tarnished.

Events leading to Becket's murder

1. Becket refusing to sign the Constitution of Clarendon as he felt it would punish the clerics twice for their wrong doings.
2. In 1164 Becket is found guilty of treason at the Great Council held in Northampton.
3. Becket flees to France
4. In 1170 the Pope threatens to excommunicate Henry II so Becket is allowed to return to England.
5. Becket excommunicates three bishops who supported Henry. Henry responded in outrage "Will no-one rid me of this turbulent priest?"
6. Four knights heard this phrase and in a misplaced effort to please Henry, rode to Canterbury, and murdered Becket at the altar of the Cathedral on 29 December 1170.

Consequences of Becket's Murder

- Becket's death was catastrophic for Henry II
- Pilgrims to the shrine of St Thomas Becket could go and spit at statues of the knights who killed Becket.
- Chaucer's Canterbury Tales were written about a group of pilgrims on their way to the shrine of St Thomas at Canterbury.
- The Pope excommunicated the knights who had murdered Becket. To earn the Pope's forgiveness, these knights had to go on Crusade for 14 years.
- In 1174, to show he was sorry, Henry walked barefoot to Canterbury Cathedral and allowed the monks to whip him.
- Henry had to give up on the Constitutions of Clarendon. He had failed to reduce the power of the Church.
- No King challenged the Church's power again until Henry VIII successfully did so in the 1530's.

