

Key Context

The Becket Affair and Beyond

Teachers may want to refer to this content for contextual information about the Becket Affair and the Church in the medieval period when preparing and delivering lessons. Nb: this content is essential for the Becket Affair lessons, and useful background for the Medieval Pilgrimage lesson and RE Enrichment.

Henry II (1133-1189)

Childhood

- Henry II grew up during a bitter civil war between his mother, Matilda, who was the daughter of King Henry I of England, and Stephen of Blois, Henry I's nephew.
- As Matilda's son, Henry was a key target for her opponents during the civil war. He feared for his life and could not trust anyone around him. This may have affected his personality by making him wary about who he could trust and constantly question the safety of his own position.
- He displayed behaviour that could be described as paranoid.
- He was determined to restore monarchical power.

The civil war (1135-1154)

- Henry II's grandfather, Henry I, died in 1135 without a surviving son. Henry I had a daughter, Matilda, who he named as successor to the English throne, but many wealthy barons in the twelfth century did not want a female ruler. Some of these men supported Henry I's nephew, Stephen of Blois, to be king.
- Stephen seized the throne immediately on Henry I's death, but he faced numerous rebellions, and, in 1139, Matilda led an invasion against Stephen's rule. This triggered a full-scale civil war in England.
- A compromise was reached in 1153. Stephen would be King of England until he died, but would be succeeded by Matilda's son, Henry, who would become King Henry II.
- Stephen fell ill with a stomach disorder and died in October 1154, allowing Henry to inherit the throne rather sooner than had been expected. Henry was crowned King Henry II of England in December 1154.
- The civil war occurred only 69 years after William the Conqueror took the throne of England in 1066. Henry I was William the Conqueror's son, but the new Norman royal family was still not completely secure in its position as English monarchs. This led to many blood-thirsty battles and terrible suffering for the people of England during such conflicts for power.

Reign (1154-1189)

- As well as being King of England, Henry II was also Count of Anjou, Count of Maine, Duke of Normandy, Duke of Aquitaine, Count of Nantes and Lord of Ireland, through a combination of his inheritance from his grandfather, Henry I, and his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine.
- The Becket Affair was one of the most high-profile controversies of Henry II's rule.

The Church in England

Rivalry between York and Canterbury

- In the twelfth century, the authority held by the archiepiscopates of York and Canterbury was formally undefined.
- Both were powerful churches, and there was a long-standing conflict between York and Canterbury over which had a higher position within the Church in England.
- Henry II was reluctant to state which church province held more power. It was better for him if there were two weaker churches, rather than one powerful church, so he never established if either was senior.
- While Henry delayed, York and Canterbury competed to prove to the English people which church was most powerful. This led to a strong competitive rivalry.
- The Archbishop of York fought hard for York to become the key religious centre, particularly during the Becket Affair:
 - When Thomas Becket, as Archbishop of Canterbury, was exiled in France (1164-1170), the Archbishop of York took the opportunity to perform one of Canterbury's key archiepiscopal duties.
 - In 1170, along with the Bishop of London, the Archbishop of York crowned Henry II's son, Henry the Young King, marking him as heir to the throne.
 - Becket was so furious that he placed the whole of England under 'interdict,' effectively excommunicating the whole country, forcing Henry II to seek a resolution to this. (Excommunication meant that people were not allowed access to the services of the Church, which was very serious in a world where people believed the Church was necessary to help them serve God and ultimately go to heaven on Judgement Day.)
- The result of the York-Canterbury rivalry can be seen in the fabric of York and Canterbury Cathedrals, whose medieval builders vied with each other to create the most glorious building.
- The dispute between York and Canterbury was resolved in the fourteenth century, when Pope Innocent VI declared York the 'Primate of England' and Canterbury the 'Primate of All England.' Today the Archbishop of Canterbury is senior to the Archbishop of York in the Church of England.

Canterbury Cathedral and Thomas Becket

- Thomas Becket was canonised in 1173, after miracles started to be attributed to him immediately following his death. As pilgrims started to flock to Canterbury to visit his shrine, the need to expand the cathedral became pressing.
- In 1174, a catastrophic fire severely damaged the choir of the cathedral necessitating the reconstruction of the east end which was completed by 1180. Further work on the east end took place from 1180-4 creating an ambulatory and a chapel, housing Becket's remains which allowed the cathedral to accommodate greater numbers of pilgrims.
- Pilgrims brought immense wealth to both the cathedral and the city of Canterbury.

York Minster and William of York

- To compete with Canterbury, York Minster needed to become a place of pilgrimage.
- In 1177, four years after Becket was canonised, miracles started to be attributed to William, Archbishop of York, who had died in 1154, supposedly by poison in a chalice during Mass. (There is no evidence that William was considered responsible for any miracles before Becket's murder and subsequent popularity.)
- As stories of William's miracles began to circulate, York also started to become a place of pilgrimage, and in 1227 William was also canonised. This further encouraged pilgrims to make the journey to York to visit his shrine.
- The Minster was rebuilt in the new Early English Gothic style to compete with the innovations being made at Canterbury.
- However, William of York's saintly reputation never reached the heights of the 'A-list' Thomas Becket and so York never became as a great pilgrimage centre.

England in Christendom

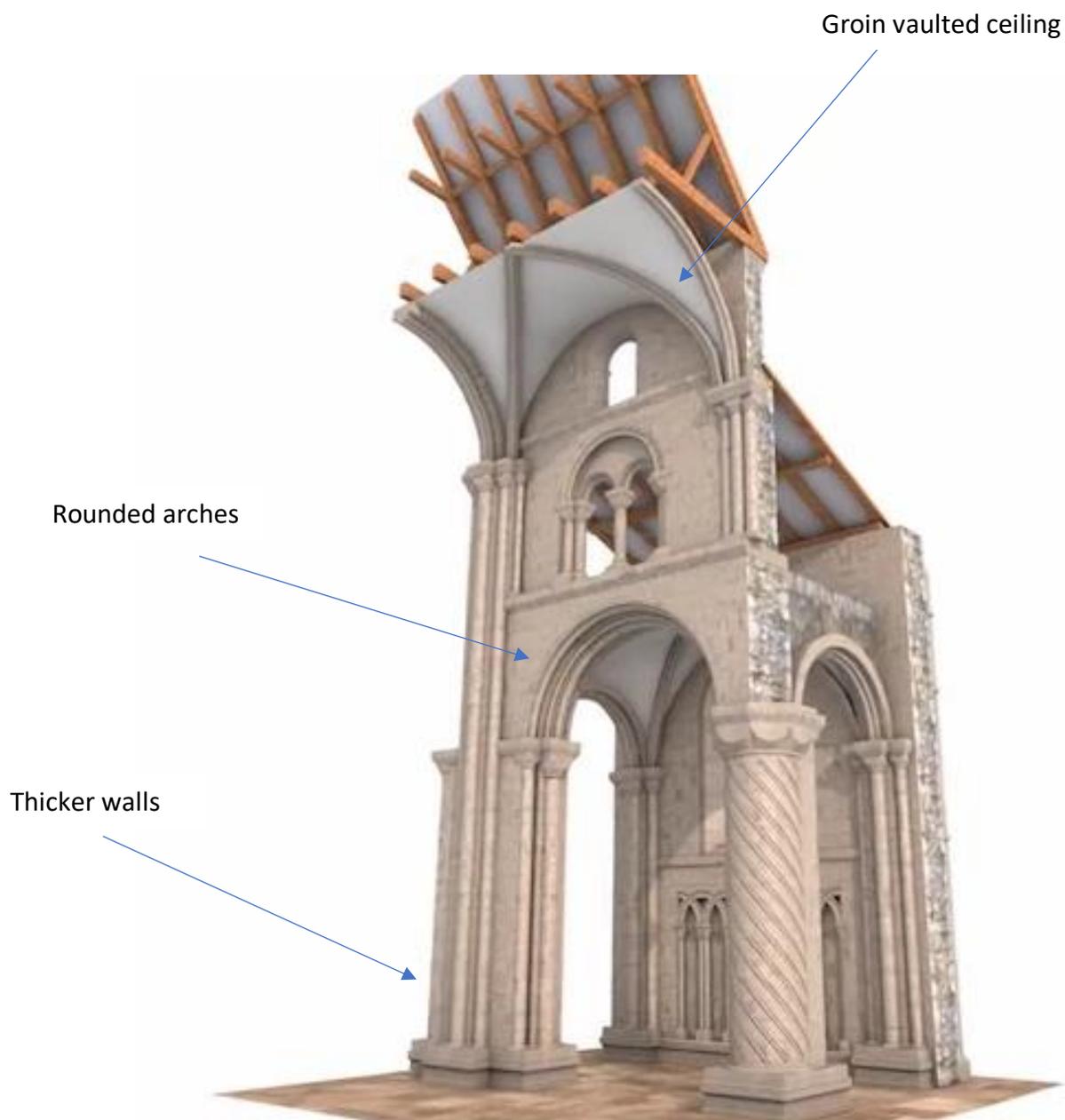
- The Pope sought to maintain good relations with Henry II
- In the medieval period, all Christian countries were a part of 'Christendom,' which held allegiance to the Pope.
- The three key secular (non-religious) powers were: England, France and the Holy Roman Empire (a powerful group of small countries across Europe).
- The Holy Roman Empire believed that the Empire was 'God's Empire' and the Holy Roman Emperor believed that he was more important than the Pope. This caused a power struggle between the Holy Roman Empire and the Pope.
- As the Pope did not have control of his own army, he needed England and France to help him in his struggle with the Holy Roman Empire. Therefore, he could not afford to fall out with Henry II. This impacted upon how the Pope approached Church politics in England and how he acted during the Becket Affair.

The Development of Architectural Style

The late-twelfth to early-thirteenth century was a huge period of transition from the Romanesque to the Gothic style, with many innovations taking place:

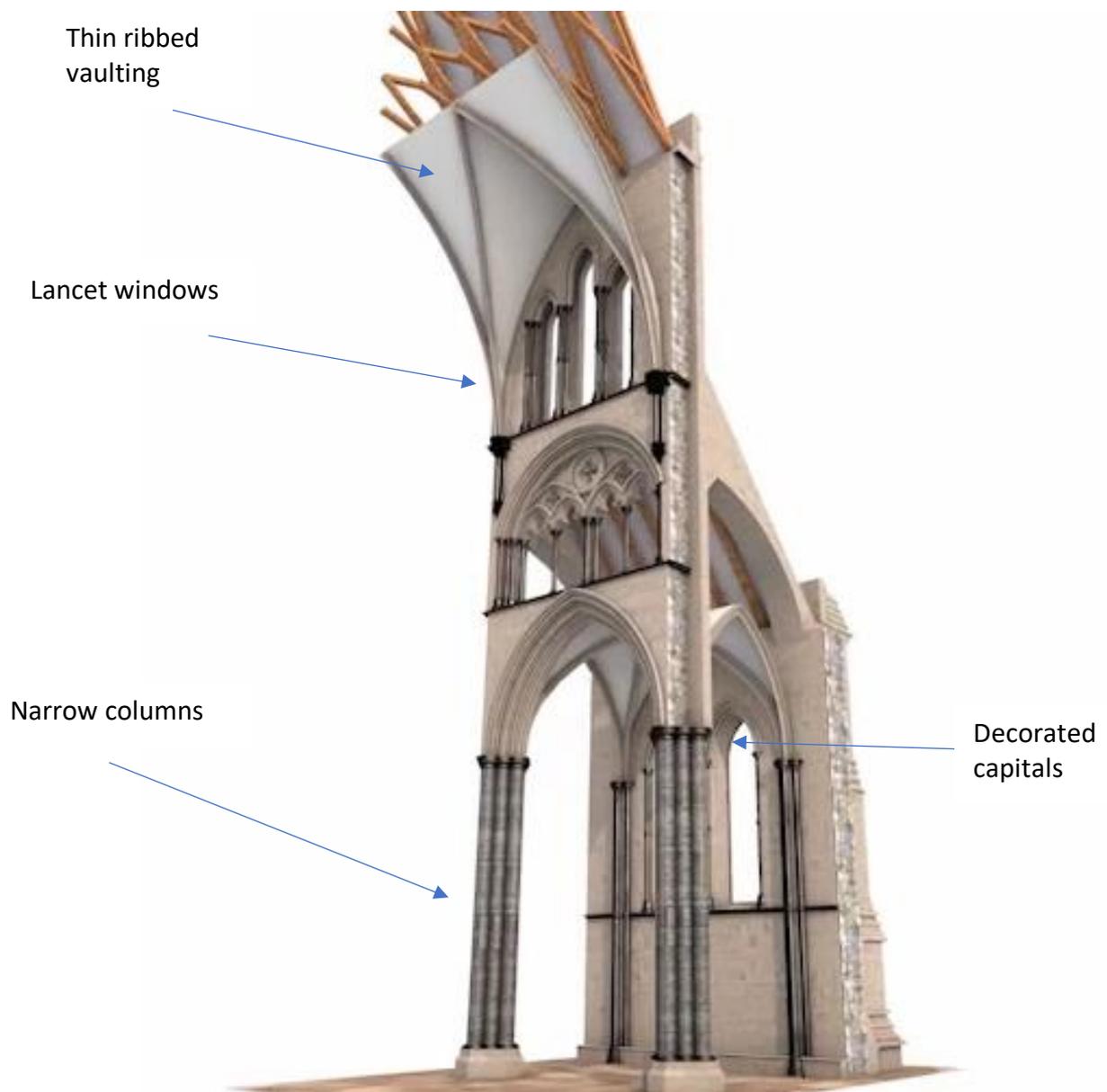
Romanesque

- Introduced to England shortly after the Norman Conquest in 1066 and developed from Roman architecture.
- Its general characteristics include thicker walls, rounded arches and simple tunnel or groin vaulted ceilings.



Early English Gothic

- The first stage of the Gothic style in England, Early English Gothic, came to England in roughly 1200.
- It introduced pointed arches, thin ribbed vaulting and tall windows, known as lancet windows, to English churches.
- The style enabled the building of both higher and more spacious churches, whose skeletal structures allowed more light to enter inside.
- Another characteristic of the Early English Gothic is the added decoration to the top of the column capitals.



Early English Gothic style
south transept at York
Minster, begun in 1225.

