

The Becket Affair: Context

York vs. Canterbury

In the 1100s, the archbishops of Canterbury and York had equal standing. However, the two archbishops each desired their own church province to be the most powerful in the Church in England. Henry II was reluctant to state if either held more power and kept delaying the decision to elevate one or the other. This was because it was better for him if there were two weaker church leaders in England, rather than one powerful leader.

While Henry was delaying the decision, the archbishops of York and Canterbury tried to prove to the English people which cathedral was the most powerful. This led to a strong rivalry with each part of the Church in England trying to out-perform the other. The Archbishop of York wanted York to become the key religious centre and pushed York's position. When Becket was exiled in France, the Archbishop of York performed some of the Archbishop of Canterbury's official duties, intensifying the rivalry.

The Pope did not want to quarrel with Henry II

In the medieval world, all west-European Christian countries were a part of 'Christendom,' which held allegiance to the Pope. The three key powers were: England, France and the Holy Roman Empire (an influential group of small countries across Europe). The rulers of the Holy Roman Empire believed that their empire was 'God's Empire' and the Emperor believed that he was more important than the Pope. This caused a political 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 against the Holy Roman Empire. Therefore, he could not afford to fall out with Henry II. This impacted upon how the Pope interfered in Church politics in England and how he acted during the Becket Affair.

Henry II was unstable following a civil war

Henry II's grandfather, King Henry I of England, died in 1135 without a surviving son. Henry I had a daughter, Matilda, who he named successor to the English throne. However, many wealthy men in the 12th century did not want a female ruler. Some of them supported Henry I's nephew, Stephen, to be king instead. This led to a civil war in England between Stephen and Matilda over who should rule England. Eventually a compromise was agreed in 1153. Stephen would be king until his death, and then Matilda's son, Henry, would take the throne. Just one year later, Stephen fell ill with a stomach illness and died. This allowed Henry to inherit the throne much quicker than he expected. Henry was crowned Henry II of England in December 1154.

Henry II grew up during the civil war. It was an unstable time for him. Because of the warring between Stephen and his mother Matilda, the young Henry feared for his life and could not trust anyone around him. This may have affected his later personality when he became king, by making him wary about who he could trust and constantly question the safety of his own position.

Thomas Becket taunted the soldiers

The surviving source material suggests that Henry II did not send the knights to Canterbury with the intention of killing Thomas Becket. They were merely there to talk to Thomas and to change his mind about Henry and the level of power Henry held as king.

However, in the cathedral, Thomas annoyed the knights by teasing and mocking them, and this might have goaded them into killing him. Thomas may have even wanted to be killed because of a desire to become a martyr (someone who died for the Church). He may have believed his religious legacy would last, and he would be remembered if he was killed by the king's men in a holy space.