

The Feud of Friendship: The Battle over Religious Authority in Angevin England

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Political and religious authority under the Angevin kings during the 12th and 13th century created conflicts, wars, and struggles for religious and political dominance between the ruling Plantagenet kings and the clergy. The Plantagenet Dynasty, as the following monarchs would be known up until 1399, were a powerful Franco-English noble family. A trademark of the Plantagenets was their significant dominions in both England and France and zeal for administrative and religious control over their kingdom.¹ These kings viewed their authority as ordained by God with rights to regulate the Church, while the bishops and clergymen were weary of royal involvement. This dramatic struggle came to a head in the late 12th century with King Henry II of England and his once-friend and chancellor, Thomas Becket the Archbishop of Canterbury. Commonly known as the Becket Controversy, the struggle for religious power during this period created lasting implications for the future of religious and secular power in England. The Becket Controversy personified the monumental struggles between the King and the clergy over power in the Catholic Church in England under the Angevin kings. Both contenders for religious power sought legitimacy in appealing to ancient customs and outside actors.

From a historical viewpoint, the Plantagenet Dynasty can be broken into smaller families. The Angevin rulers included Henry II, and his sons Richard I and John I of England. Henry's family originated as a noble family from Anjou, France—hence, giving their name to the

¹ The British Monarchy, "The Plantagenet's and Angevin Dynasties," History of the Monarchy, www.royal.gov.uk

succeeding royal dynasty from 1154 to King John's death in 1216.² The impact of the Angevin rulers extended from just pure political control. Each successive ruler increased administrative, cultural, economical, and religious control over both England and France, making both territories part of the Angevin Empire.

In order to determine the cause of the controversy, a historical introduction to the various political and religious conditions present in Angevin England will illuminate the positions and cause of the controversy. After describing the foundations of the controversy, the responses taken by Archbishop Becket and King Henry II will show how their relationship represented the macro level struggle for religious power. Finally, the implications of this conflict show that the struggle between Church and State did not end here and that this struggle increased in scope and frequency for the remainder of the Middle Ages.

After the death of King Henry I of England, a civil war ensued to decide who was to succeed the king. His daughter, Matilda, was promised the throne by her father, but Stephen of Blois, another relative, gained the support of many Norman groups.³ This struggle for succession ended over a decade later, in 1154, with the two sides finally recognizing Matilda's son, Henry Plantagenet, the count of Anjou, as King Henry II of England.⁴ Henry sought to unite powerful political forces in France as well as England in order to strengthen territory and power over the various regions. During the civil war preceding Henry's rule, the absence of a centralized royal authority created vacancies in local offices, and the growing power of local landlords was consistent with the begins of feudal obligations. Henry, as the first of the Angevin kings, ruled

² History of the British Monarchy, www.royal.gov.uk

³ Wim Blockmans and Peter Hoppenbrouwers, *Introduction to Medieval Europe: 300-1550*, trans. Isola van den Hoven, (London: Routledge, 2007), 171.

⁴ Blockmans and Hoppenbrouwers, *Medieval Europe*, 171

vast amounts of land in Southern, Western, and Northern France, as well as his Kingdom of England. To increase political authority, Henry began to slowly fill vacancies in lordships in local lands. Henry ushered in the Angevin Dynasty and Empire with significant administrative and political control, making his kingdom one of the most powerful in Europe during the 11th and 12th Centuries.⁵

Before Henry, the center of political power in England was at the local level. The various shires and local lords dominated the decisions of national elites. As other kings before him, Henry had to navigate the complex and sometimes dangerous arrangement of local authority. Henry's political strategy for governing consisted of respecting pre-Norman conquest rights of Anglo-Saxon landowners and local lords, combined with the new Norman institutions of tax collecting and homage to the king of England.⁶ As a national figure, Henry could not simply ignore the concerns of barons and other local nobility. In a political system of local delegation, Henry's rule and policies depended upon input and support from local lords. In the beginning of Henry's reign, baronial insubordination became a dramatic threat to his rule. In 1156, just two years after his accession, Henry defeated an uprising by a noble, Hugh Bigod, and while the problem of insurrection was dampened, the issue of rebellion was never fully diminished.⁷ Like it or not, political power from the king flowed down to the local lords, who ultimately enacted policy. While not ruling under a limited or an absolute monarchy, Henry gained and maintained political power by repressing and subjugating local lords to follow his policies at Henry's behest. His style of leadership fused a hybrid monarchy where he was the supreme ruler of England, but

⁵ Richard Mortimer, *Angevin England 1154-1258*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 37

⁶ Mortimer, *Angevin England*, 6

⁷ Kate Norgate, *England Under the Angevin Kings*, (Franklin: New York, 1969), 120

he had local lords do his bidding. As the leader of the Angevin Empire, Henry had concerns of local problems in England as well as his territories in France, adding to the pressure to secure his power over his holdings. In order to temper local strife, Henry strove to consolidate courts and systems of administration under direct royal authority. With the creation of two courts, the Exchequer and the Curia Regis respectively, the control of finances and judicial proceedings fell under Henry's direct control.⁸ By centralizing financial and judicial authority early in his reign, Henry set the stage for a later growth in royal administration that conflicted directly with the Church.

With royal authority precariously dependent upon local lords and nobles, Henry needed to ensure cooperation or at least repression of local opinions in order to achieve national power. The relationship between King and the Church was far more complex. For any king in Western Europe, one of the most difficult aspects of ruling was the conflict with the power of the Church. The growing power of the Catholic Church and the tremendous administration system made any political decisions by the king difficult. The advanced system of hierarchy in the Church and the subsequent reforms to remove secular authorities from the religious structure increased the divide between church and state. The development of canon law as a separate and binding form of legal codes challenged political authority of lords and nobles to control "their" local clergy and churches. England's canon law is made up of ecclesiastical decisions from clergy, the Pope, and other areas where religious councils and courts make decisions that form the basis for future decisions.⁹ The scope of clerical jurisdiction, especially within the legal system, prompted Henry's predecessors to increase royal control. Henry's steps to consolidate finances and judicial

⁸ J.R. Green, *Henry the Second*, (London: Macmillan and Co, 1925), 68

⁹ Mortimer, *Angevin England*, 106

proceedings under royal auspices tried to limit the jurisdiction of the clergy. Another area of conflict during the early years of Henry's rule was fought over wills and the authority to rescind land and whether this power belonged to clergy or the king.¹⁰ The significant overlapping of powers in the judicial system prolonged the battles between Henry and the clergy. Before the rise of Thomas Becket to Archbishop of Canterbury, the lines of conflict between Henry and the Church were beginning to increase in ferocity and frequency.

The struggle for power between King Henry, Thomas Becket, and the Church dominated most of his reign, for better or for worse. After looking at the preceding years before the Becket Controversy, the stage is now set to begin to discuss how a friendship turned into a bitter rivalry for power in England. Thomas Becket, a son of a London merchant, worked his way into the royal administration from a clerk to the archbishop of Canterbury until he was made Chancellor under King Henry II. The chancellor position in the early medieval period was the highest administrative official under the ruling monarch.¹¹ Soon, King Henry and Becket became close friends under vows of extreme loyalty shown by Thomas Becket to Henry. Under King Henry's many tactics to extend control and influence of local monasteries, Becket as the Chancellor became increasingly unpopular with many officials in the English Church while securing his own fortune from Henry's policies.¹²

After years of this friendship and loyalty between Henry and Becket, a vacancy appeared for the Archbishop of Canterbury, and in 1162, King Henry appointed his close friend and

¹⁰ Mortimer, Angevin England, 111

¹¹ Blockmans and Hoppenbrouwers, Medieval Europe, 171

¹² *ibid*, 172

chancellor, Thomas Becket, as the Archbishop of Canterbury.¹³ King Henry, with this appointment, appeared to have felt extremely confident in his plan to assert the king's authority over the church due to Becket's relationship and loyalty to him; tragically, this could not have been further from the truth.

With the appointment of Thomas Becket as Archbishop of Canterbury, King Henry now had his friend in the highest religious office in England. The Archbishop of Canterbury often served as the papal legate or the Pope's personal representative in England, and he was invested with all religious authorities in England second only to papal authority.¹⁴ The conflict between Henry and Becket arose almost immediately in 1163. For years, the ecclesiastical powers of the church over courts and trials of clergy had been a point of contention with King Henry. The king attempted to assert control over the trials and punishment of clergy, abbots, deacons, bishops and other church officials, while Archbishop Becket refused this move by saying that all officials were under oaths to the church, declaring the church as the proper avenue for trial and punishment.¹⁵ Roger of Hoveden, who was well positioned to chronicle the previous accounts of Henry's administration as a royal clerk, recorded this account. Writing in the early 13th Century, Roger was writing decades after the conflict of Henry's reign. While no explicit bias can be proven, Roger, as a royal clerk, could have certainly had an implicit bias by protecting the status of the Royal administration. King Henry increased royal power and administration over his reign. The establishment of a powerful royal bureaucracy may have granted Roger's position,

¹³ *ibid*, 171

¹⁴ Mortimer, *Angevin England*, 111

¹⁵ Roger Hoveden, *The Chronicle: "On the Disputes between Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury and Henry II of England,"* trans. Henry Riley, *Medieval Sourcebook: Fordham*, (1998)
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/hoveden-becket.asp#1162>, 1162

and he would be looking to ensure the accuracy and legitimacy of administrative authority by reflecting Henry's account rather than focusing on Becket's position.

Not to be outdone by the Archbishop's refusal of his demands, King Henry attempted to force Becket's hand by issuing writs of obedience to all royally appointed officials in 1164. His once loyal friend, who served him unapologetically, now served another master even more faithfully, the Church, and Becket was determined to maintain his and the Church's authority over all ecclesiastical matters.¹⁶

A minor disagreement over religious authority between Henry and Becket became a much larger symbolic struggle between the State and the Church, as each man represented the pressures, opinions, and desires of the two institutions. In January of 1164, King Henry summoned all religious officials to meet at Clarendon to work out an agreement between the role of royal authority with respect to ecclesiastical courts and officials. Throughout the meeting, Henry made Becket and other religious officials swear to obey and uphold the King's authority and decisions in ecclesiastical matters.¹⁷ Archbishop Becket accepted and told other officials to obey laws set by King Henry but to also save and preserve their obedience to God for other matters and laws.¹⁸ These proceedings were compiled into law and became known as the Constitutions of Clarendon, which marked a turning point in the struggle between Henry and Becket as the King demanded obedience and respect while Becket was less than sure to agree to these demands. Several provisions in the Constitutions concerning actions of the clergy are prohibited including leaving the country without the King's permission as well as all clergy are

¹⁶ Blockmans and Hoppenbrouwers, *Medieval Europe*, 172

¹⁷ Blockmans and Hoppenbrouwers, *Medieval Europe*,

¹⁸ Hoveden, "On the Disputes," 1163

subject to the King's justice in addition to ecclesiastical punishments.¹⁹ King Henry also tried to solidify his control over appointments of abbots and bishops within the King's demesne, or lands under the King's control. The King's constitutions required these vacancies to be appointed by the King regardless of Church hierarchy.²⁰ This means that even the archbishoprics of York and Canterbury, if under direct authority of the King of England, were subject to appointment and ratification by the King directly.

The Constitutions of Clarendon, as they became known, dramatically increased King Henry's power over the ecclesiastical affairs of all church functions in England. However, Archbishop Becket did not agree to these demands for long. Shortly after the convention at Clarendon, Becket asked the King to repeal the acts, as he believed he entered into the agreement in sin and under duress. Becket claimed the agreements null and void, which incurred the anger of King Henry. Henry threatened all clergy with exile or punishment if they followed Becket in refusing to agree to the accords reached at Clarendon.²¹ King Henry actively campaigned among other religious leaders in England to oppose Becket and his supporters. Henry courted Roger, the Archbishop of York to agree to Clarendon. The feud between the Archbishops of York and Canterbury was well known, and Henry sought to turn the tables on Becket by securing the support of the Archbishop of York. Henry sought appeal to the Pope in Rome that Becket had ignored the King's justice and wished to cite Becket on perjury by refusing to agree to the agreements at Clarendon.²² Becket went to appeal to the Pope directly and escaped from England

¹⁹ Fordham Medieval Sourcebook, "The Constitutions of Clarendon," trans. White and Notestein, 1915, Fordham Medieval Sourcebook, (1996). <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/cclarendon.asp>

²⁰ Fordham, "Clarendon," 1996

²¹ Hoveden, "On the Disputes," 1164

²² Norgate, England, 39

in the end of 1164. The King of France openly accepted Becket, who went to Pope Alexander to discover that King Henry's loyal bishops were already presenting the King's case to the Pope. Becket laid the Constitutions of Clarendon at the feet of the Pope, who agreed with Becket and declared them void. On Saint Stephen's Day, Henry, angered by the Pope's decision, confiscated the lands and possessions of Archbishop Becket and banished all of Becket's followers from England.²³

With Becket in exile in France, Henry sought to capitalize on Becket's absence and in 1165 reinstated the Constitutions of Clarendon and forced the Archbishop of York and other bishops to agree to uphold the documents and declare Thomas Becket as an outlaw living in France escaping the King's justice. For the next six years in exile, Thomas Becket continued his struggle for leverage in the battle against King Henry. Notably, Becket continued to garner the support of other bishops in England and declared the Constitutions of Clarendon banned and void.²⁴ In 1167, Becket continued his campaign against Henry by excommunicating several loyal followers of the King and began to urge Pope Alexander III in Rome to intercede on his behalf to pressure the King to see Becket's claim and offer of reconciliation. Becket did not want to excommunicate the king, as he still believed in his repentance and reformation with Becket.²⁵ In 1170, after many negotiations and diplomatic efforts between the Pope, Henry, and Becket, the King and the newly reinstated Archbishop Becket reached an agreement for Becket to end his six-year exile and return to England.²⁶

²³ Norgate, England, 39-41

²⁴ Blockmans and Hoppenbrouwers, Medieval Europe, 172

²⁵ Hoveden, "On the Disputes," 1170

²⁶ Blockmans and Hoppenbrouwers, Medieval Europe, 172

However, it soon became clear that Becket and the King would not forgive and forget their differences from the preceding decade. Throughout much of 1170, Henry and Becket agreed to remove condemnations and excommunications from those who suffered during their feud. An agreement that went back to the status quo before 1163 seemed to be on its way; however, on Christmas Day, 1170, the Archbishop continued with excommunicating several more of the King's officials: the King's patience ran out.²⁷ The King, speaking to a group of knights, said, "what parcel of fools and dastards have I nourished in my house, that none of them can be found to avenge me of this one upstart clerk!"²⁸ On December 29, 1170, four of the king's knights—Hugh de Morville, William de Tracy, Reginald Fitz-Urse, and Richard le Brenton—took the king's words to heart and brutally murdered Thomas Becket during his prayers in Canterbury Cathedral.²⁹ After a decade of conflict, Thomas Becket the man was dead; however, the problems for Henry continued as Thomas Becket the martyr forever damaged King Henry's reign.

After Becket's murder, King Henry II of England was distraught with grief and for the rest of his reign tried to erase his involvement in Becket's death. King Henry made penance to Becket's grave and fasted in respect for Becket.³⁰ Benedict of Peterborough recorded this account. Benedict was an abbot of Peterborough abbey granted by King Henry II. Benedict was also a close colleague of Thomas Becket, and his account of Becket's murder places the fault

²⁷ Mortimer, *Angevin England*, 117

²⁸ Norgate, *England*, 78

²⁹ Norgate, *England*, 78

³⁰ Benedict of Peterborough, "The Murder of Thomas Becket," trans. Scott McLetchie, *Medieval Sourcebook: Fordham*, 1994. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1170benedict-becket.asp>

upon the four knights while leaving Henry free from blame. Henry's involvement in Becket's death was and still is a tremendous controversy. Due to Benedict's position, it is reasonable to assume he might have been beholden to Henry for his position and also as personal friend of Becket he had to show the fault was on the knights and not Henry. Because of these situations, Benedict had powerful incentives to ensure that the fault of Becket's murder was assigned to the knights and not to Henry. The reliability of this source is in question; however, as with any medieval source, bias is not always visible, nor does it necessarily affect the reliability. Benedict's account remains a popular and important piece of documentation of the death of Becket.

Many of the accounts used in this analysis are derived from primary sources. The validity and biases present in these writings can certainly complicate any discussions. Whether Roger of Hoveden's or Benedict's accounts are infused with bias cannot be known for certain. However, primary sources such as these offer interesting insights into the reign of Henry and the aftermath of Becket's murder. Even the Constitutions of Clarendon compiled by Henry's counselors were created to re-assert royal power of several Church policies and practices. These Constitutions certainly favored Henry's policies, as Henry himself initiated them. Yet these documents are also crucial to understand the dynamics between Becket and Henry.

In 1172, the pope canonized Thomas Becket as a saint and martyr. Henry, under threat of interdict from the Pope, accepted that he contributed to Becket's death and that he had to promise reforms in laws between the Church and the State and to go on a crusade for the Church.³¹ By accepting the reforms of the Pope, Henry's authority over ecclesiastical power began to diminish.

³¹ Blockmans and Hoppenbrouwers, *Medieval Europe*, 173

After 1172, described as a period of Papal dominance in England, the Pope began to actively pursue policies and interests in England through his many legates. The supreme dominance of the King over the Church in the 1160s was never again to resurface for hundreds of years until the Reformation.³² The remaining years of King Henry's rule was characterized by a series of baronial revolts and rebellion of his many sons over authority of the Angevin Empire. Meanwhile, the cult of Becket continued to grow and soon the deeds of Becket were overshadowed by the myths and mystique surrounding Becket's now famous standoff with royal power. Many contemporaries and religious authorities after Becket's death characterized his martyrdom as the most dramatic in the Church's long history of pushing for more ecclesiastical support. Becket was often characterized as a "new man" dedicated to religious beliefs apart from royal control as well as a shepherd, who guided his "sheep" while they were threatened by the power hungry King Henry II.³³

The struggle between King Henry II of England and his friend Thomas Becket the Archbishop of Canterbury may have only lasted a few years, but their struggle typified the dynamic conflict between Church and State. These two served as players as each side asserted and lost control. The personification of the conflict between Church and State illustrates just how powerful this debate became in the early Middle Ages until our modern times. While King Henry II and Thomas Becket were simply humans, their actions, deeds, and their legacies symbolized much more. These two actors upon the stage of history symbolized their causes: the authority of the State and the power of the Church. The collision course in England began much earlier than

³² Mortimer, *Angevin England*, 118

³³ Kay Slocum Brainerd, "Liturgies in Honour of Thomas Becket," Toronto: University of Toronto Press, (2004).

1162 and lasted much longer than 1170. However, these few years served as the blueprint for future demonstrations for and against royal authority. The Becket Controversy illustrates the debate between Church and State. The personal dynamics only increased the animosity between Becket and Henry. This struggle became the personification of the battle between royal authority and religious power. Perhaps this is the greatest legacy of the Becket Controversy: the conflict ushered in a new, brutal battle between King and Church on a level never before seen that would eventually dominate the European continent for centuries. The Becket Controversy became the first in a long line of political struggles between the Catholic Church and royal power.

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