

2 The medieval monarch – power and its problems

King Henry's nightmare

What problems did medieval kings face?

The king was the most powerful person in the country. He had to defend England and keep law and order. But the power of the king was always being threatened.

Henry I became king in 1100 and had to fight hard to hold on to his kingdom. One night he had a terrifying dream in which he was attacked by three groups of enemies. His nightmare (Source A) shows the kinds of people every king had to control during the Middle Ages. In this chapter we look at some of the problems kings had to face.

Source A Pictures of King Henry's nightmare drawn by John of Worcester in the twelfth century. John was a friend of the king's doctor.



Investigations

The three different groups of people shown in Source A were all a problem for medieval kings: angry peasants, churchmen and barons. Look closely at the pictures and complete a copy of the table below.

Henry's Nightmare

| | Type of people | How can we recognise them in the pictures? |
|-----------|----------------|--|
| Picture 1 | | |
| Picture 2 | | |
| Picture 3 | | |

The king and the Church

Why was the Archbishop of Canterbury murdered in 1170?

On 29 December 1170 four knights hacked Thomas Becket, the most important Church leader in England, to death. They claimed they were acting on the orders of King Henry II. How could this tragedy have happened?



Source A An angel sorting souls. Those on the left are saved. Those on the right are being sent to hell. This scene was carved over the door of the Cathedral in Autun in France in the twelfth century.

Why was the Archbishop of Canterbury important?

The church was the most important building in any town or village. It was the centre of the community. Priests took care of people while they were alive and made sure their souls went to heaven after their death.

All the countries of Western Europe, including England, were Christian and part of the Roman Catholic **Church**. The leader of the Church was the Pope, who lived in Rome. Most people believed that the Pope was God's servant on earth and in matters of religion his word was law.

The Pope's power reached out from Rome through a network of archbishops and bishops, each in charge of an area called a diocese. They were rich men, usually well educated and from noble families. The most powerful person in England after the king was the Archbishop of Canterbury. The king could choose the Archbishop, but the Church had its own laws and courts. Even the king sometimes had to obey the Pope.



Source B The coronation of a king. The king was thought to be chosen by God. He needed the blessing of the Church at his coronation. This picture shows the coronation of King Edward I.

Key words

Church This can mean a church building or an entire Christian community – such as the Roman Catholic Church.

Investigations

- Of the five statements below, two are false. Write out the three true ones.
 - The Pope lived in England.
 - The Pope was head of the Roman Catholic Church.
 - The Roman Catholic Church was a large building in Rome.
 - People believed the Church helped them get to heaven.
 - Bishops passed on the orders of the Pope.
- Look carefully at Source A. How would this idea about what happened after death make people obey the Church?
- How does Source B show the importance of the Church – even for kings?

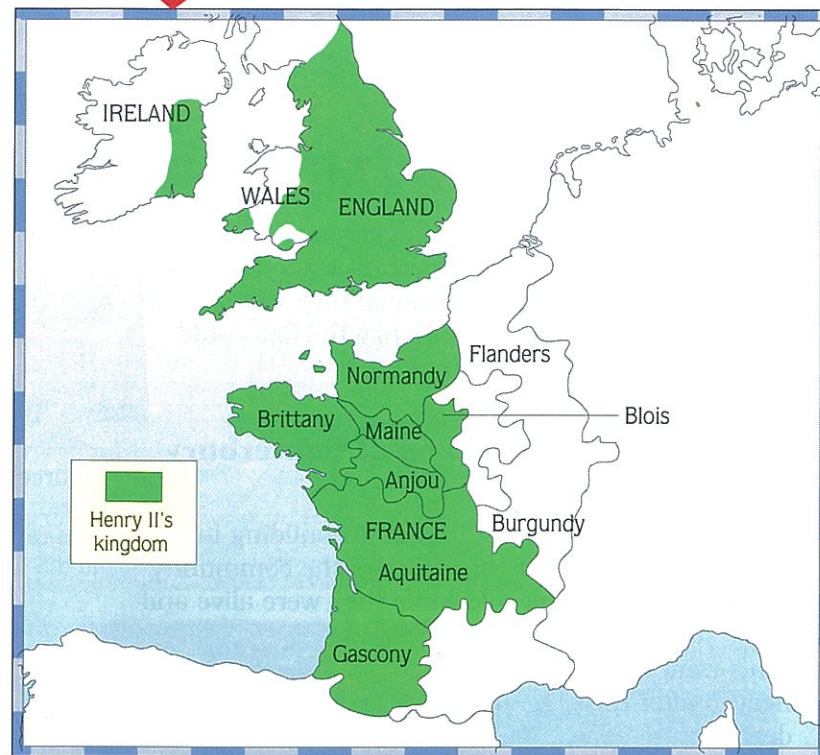
What was Henry II like?

Henry became king in 1154. He took over a country in ruins. The feeble government of King Stephen had let the barons get out of control. They had built castles without permission, fought each other and stolen land from weaker men.

Henry had to bring back order. He had great energy and was always on the move around his kingdom. He was a good army leader, and forced the barons to obey him. He took back royal lands and castles that Stephen had lost.

Courts run by barons and sheriffs had become dishonest. Arguments about land had been settled in combat, where the strongest fighter won. Henry appointed honest royal judges who toured the country. He ordered that cases about land be settled in royal courts. He returned stolen lands to their rightful owners. Ordinary people used the king's court because they were fairer. The money from court fines went to the king, so this meant he needed to raise less in taxes.

Source C Henry's kingdom in 1175. In a reign of 32 years he spent Christmas in 24 different places.



The king's eyes are dove-like when he is at peace, but in bursts of temper they flash like lightning. He never sits down except when on horseback or at meals. He always has his weapons in his hands when not working or at his books.

By Peter Blois, a scholar who travelled with Henry's court

He was fierce to those who challenged him, but merciful to those he defeated; hard on his servants and generous with strangers. If he hated someone he hardly ever came to love them: if he loved someone he hardly ever came to hate them.

Written by Gerald of Wales, a bishop, in the 1180s

Source D Two views of Henry II's character

Source E The royal seal of Henry II. This was stamped in wax on his orders.



Why did Henry and Thomas quarrel?

In 1162 Henry made Becket Archbishop of Canterbury. He thought this was the perfect way of getting control of the Church. But to Henry's disappointment, Thomas took his duties seriously (Source F).

In 1164 the king complained that priests who committed crimes were being let off too lightly by Church courts. He wanted them treated the same as everyone else and sent to royal courts. When Becket refused, the king ordered that he be put on trial. Hearing this, Thomas fled abroad.

In 1170 Henry used the Archbishop of York to crown his eldest son. The king believed this was vital to stop any fighting over who should be the next ruler after his death. It was important for Henry to show that the next king had the approval and blessing of the Church. He also invited Thomas to come back.

Becket returned but was furious. He excommunicated all the bishops who had been helping Henry while he was away. As Source G shows, the scene was set for a tragedy.

Murder in the cathedral

We know the details of Becket's murder because eyewitnesses wrote down what they saw. One was Edward Grim, a priest who tried to save Thomas.

The murderers came in full armour with swords and axes. The monks tried to bolt the doors against them but the Archbishop ordered them to be opened, saying 'It is not right to make a fortress of a house of prayer'. In a mad fury the knights called out 'Where is Thomas Becket, traitor to the king and the country?' He replied, 'I am ready to die for my God so that my blood will win the Church peace and freedom'. They tried to drag him outside to kill him but he clung to a pillar. Then, realising that he was to die, he bowed his head in prayer and joined his hands together. The first blow struck his head and almost cut off the arm of him who tells the story, for he had his arms around the Archbishop to protect him. The second blow also struck his head but he stood firm. At the third blow he fell to his knees and elbows. The fourth blow split his skull and his blood and brains stained the floor.

Source I An eyewitness account of Becket's murder, by Edward Grim

Key words

Hair shirt A shirt of very rough cloth to make the wearer uncomfortable.

Excommunicate Expel from the Church.

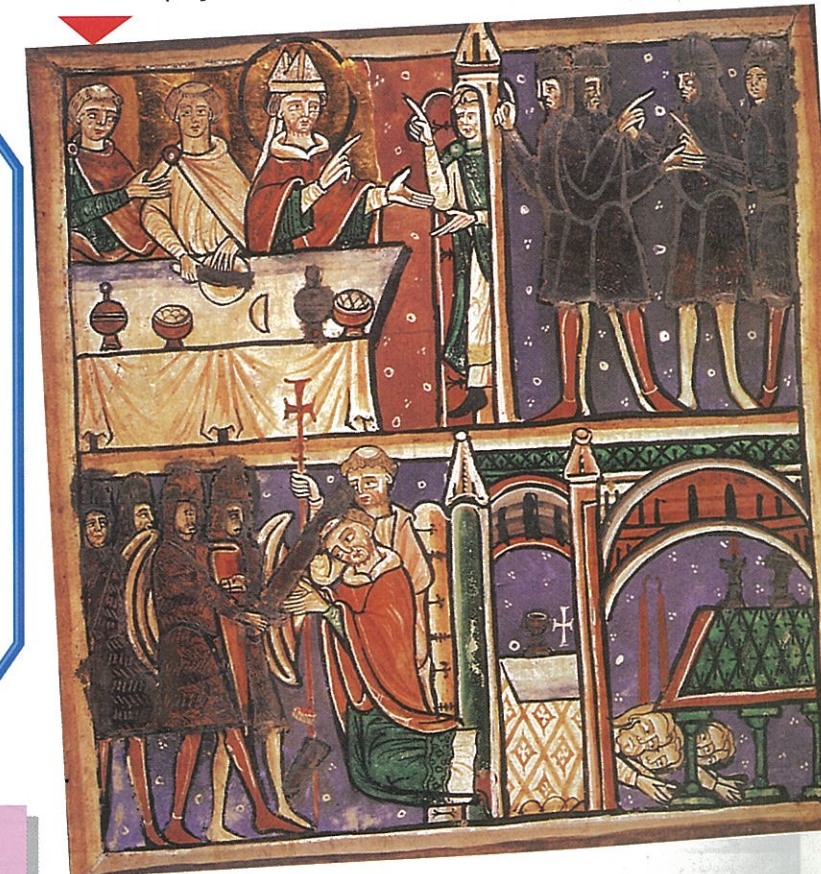
Source F Becket's character. By C. Warren Holister, from *The Making of England*, 1988.

Becket changed from a chancellor who enjoyed life to a stern archbishop. He felt it his duty to stand up for the rights of God's Church. Other churchmen thought he did not deserve the job, so he wore a **hair shirt** under his clothes to show his devotion to God. He would not be Henry's tool.

Source G By William Fitzstephen, a priest in Becket's household, writing in 1175

The Archbishop of York and other bishops met the king and told him they had been **excommunicated**. They said Becket was a traitor, going around England at the head of a strong army. One of them said, 'My lord, while Thomas lives you will not see peace or quiet or have good days'. At this the king felt great anger against Becket. Four knights eager to win his favour left the court to kill the Archbishop.

Source H A painting made in about 1180. Four knights arrive while Becket sits at supper. They kill him but later return to pray at his tomb.



Who won – the Church or the king?

The Church

Henry apologised and allowed himself to be whipped in public by monks.

Becket was made a saint in 1173 by the Pope. Pilgrims flocked to see his tomb (and still do).

Criminal priests were still tried in Church courts.

The king

Henry could still choose Archbishops.

The Pope needed to stay friends with Henry. When things cooled down he let the king keep tight control over the Church.

Source J This picture of the murder of Becket was painted in about 1190. How far does it back up the evidence of Edward Grim's eyewitness account in Source I?



Remember...

- Henry was a dynamic king who gave England strong government.
- He wanted to control the Church but was stopped by his old friend Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury.
- Four knights killed Thomas to please the king.

Investigations

- 1 Look at Source C. Why might Henry have needed to travel round his kingdom so much?
- 2 Read Source D. Do you think Henry had the right character to be a successful king? If you could give him advice, what would you say? Begin like this:

Your majesty, may I humbly suggest...

- 3 Becket was in charge of Source E. How does this show that Henry trusted him?
- 4 Read Source F. Is a historian more or less likely to give a fair view of Becket's character than someone who lived at the time? Give reasons for your answer.
- 5 According to Source G, how guilty was the king for Becket's death?
- 6 Some historians have said that Becket wanted to die. According to Sources H and I do you think this is true? Why might Becket think dying would help his cause?