The Murder of Thomas Becket, 1170 http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/pfbecket.htm

1 A sword's crushing blow extinguished the life of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, on a cold December evening as he struggled on the steps of his altar. The brutal event sent a tremor through Medieval Europe. Public opinion of the time and subsequent history have laid the blame for the murder at the feet of Becket's former close personal friend, King Henry II.

2 Becket was born in 1118, in Normandy the son of an English merchant. His family was well off, his father a former Sheriff of London. Becket benefited from his family's status first by being sent to Paris for his education and from there to England where he joined the household of Theobold, the then Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket's administrative skills, his charm, intelligence and diplomacy propelled him forward. The archbishop sent him to Paris to study law and upon his return to England made him Archdeacon of Canterbury.

3 Becket's big break came in 1154, when Theobold introduced him to the newly crowned King, Henry II. The two hit it off immediately, their similar personal chemistries forming a strong bond between them. Henry named Becket his Chancellor. Archbishop Theobold died in 1161, and Henry immediately saw the opportunity to increase his influence over the Church by naming his loyal advisor to the highest ecclesiastical post in the land. Henry petitioned the Pope who agreed. There was only one slight hindrance. Becket, busy at court, had never been ordained. No problem, Becket was first invested as a priest. The next day he was ordained a Bishop, and that afternoon, June 2, 1162, made Archbishop of Canterbury.

4 If King Henry believed that by having "his man" in the top post of the Church, he could easily impose his will upon this powerful religious institution, he was sadly mistaken. Becket's allegiance shifted from the court to the Church inspiring him to take a stand against his king. In those days, the Church reserved the right to try felonious clerics in their own religious courts of justice and not those of the crown. Henry was determined to increase control of his realm by eliminating this custom. In 1163, a Canon accused of murder was acquitted by a church court. The public outcry demanded justice and the Canon was brought before a court of the king. Becket's protest halted this attempt but the action spurred King Henry to change the laws to extend his courts' jurisdiction over the clergy. Becket vacillated in his support of the king, finally refusing to agree to changes in the law. His stand prompted a royal summons to Henry's court at Northampton and the king's demand to know what Becket had done with the large sums of money that had passed through his hands as Chancellor.

5 Seeing the writing on the wall, Becket fled to France where he remained in exile for six years. The two former friends appeared to resolve their dispute in 1170 when King Henry and Becket met in Normandy. On November 30, Becket crossed the Channel returning to his post at Canterbury. Earlier, while in France, Becket had excommunicated the Bishops of London and Salisbury for their support of the king. Now, Becket remained steadfast in his refusal to absolve the bishops. This news threw King Henry (still in France) into a rage in which he was purported to shout: "What sluggards, what cowards have I brought up in my court, who care nothing for their allegiance to their lord. Who will rid me of this meddlesome priest."

6 The king's exact words have been lost to history but his outrage inspired four knights to sail to England to rid the realm of this annoying prelate. They arrived at Canterbury during the afternoon of December 29 and immediately searched for the Archbishop. Becket fled to the Cathedral where a service was in progress. The knights found him at the altar, drew their swords and began hacking at their victim finally splitting his skull.

7 The death of Becket unnerved the king. The knights who did the deed to curry the king's favor, fell into disgrace. Several miracles were said to occur at the tomb of the martyr and he was soon canonized. Hordes of pilgrims transformed Canterbury Cathedral into a shrine. Four years later, in an act of penance, the king donned a sack-cloth walking barefoot through the streets of Canterbury while eighty monks flogged him with branches. Henry capped his atonement by spending the night in the martyr's crypt. St. Thomas continued as a popular cultist figure for the remainder of the Middle Ages.