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Murder of Bishops

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## Inhalt/List of Contents

Einleitung/Introduction .....	7
PAUL FOURACRE	
Why were so many bishops killed in Merovingian Francia? .....	13
NIRA GRADOWICZ-PANCER	
Femmes royales et violences anti-épiscopales à l'époque mérovingienne: Frédégonde et le meurtre de l'évêque Prétextat .....	37
GEORG SCHEIBELREITER	
Der Tod Landberts von Maastricht .....	51
THOMAS GERGEN	
Gottesfrieden und Gewalt gegen Bischöfe – Überlegungen zu den Rechtsgrundlagen .....	83
MYRIAM SORIA	
Les évêques assassinés dans le royaume de France (XI <sup>e</sup> -XII <sup>e</sup> siècles) ...	97
REINHOLD KAISER	
Guibert de Nogent und der Bischofsmord in Laon (1112): Augenzeuge, Akteur, Dramaturg .....	121
JEAN-LOUIS KUPPER	
La double mort de l'évêque de Liège Frédéric de Namur († 1121) .....	159
PHILIPPE GEORGE	
L'iconographie du meurtre de saint Lambert de Liège .....	171
MARTIN AURELL	
Le Meurtre de Thomas Becket: Les Gestes d'un Martyr .....	187
NICHOLAS VINCENT	
The Murderers of Thomas Becket .....	211

JAN KEUPP

Reichsministerialen und Bischofsmord in staufischer Zeit ..... 273

BODO HECHELHAMMER

Zwischen Märtyrermord und Todesstrafe

Die Hinrichtung des Bischofs Marcellino von Arezzo im Jahre 1248 ... 303

MAURO SANNA

*Et si, diaboli facente malitia, gladio vel alio modo ...:*

violenze su vescovi ed ecclesiastici nella Sardegna del XIII secolo. .... 321

ANDREAS BIHRER

Die Ermordung des Konstanzer Bischofs Johann Windlock

(1351–1356) in der Wahrnehmung der Zeitgenossen und der Nachwelt 335

## Introduction

Murder is endemic in every society and western European medieval society, even allowing for the understandable exaggeration of terrified medieval intellectuals, was extremely violent. We should not, however, make the mistake of regarding medieval society as a dysfunctional modern society. Human nature may not have changed but medieval conditions were so different that violence had different causes and dimensions than that today. On the one hand, the social controls were stronger in societies where family and community relationships were of far greater importance than in our radically more mobile and rootless modern world. Far fewer people meant that in most places, individuals were far better known and more closely observed. Strangers occasioned a correspondingly bigger cultural shock; curiosity towards them and animosity against them were intenser than today. Heavy dependence on friends, family and neighbours without any sort of governmental aid or protection, the lack of entertainment at home and life spent within a narrow geographical radius under conditions of heavy physical labour brought different pressures. The same people met more frequently than today, whether they liked it or not. The pressure of the inescapability of enemies and rivals (or merely the archetypal mother-in-law), dire poverty, feuds between families, the different status accorded to war, the acceptance of violence as an honourable method of ending disputes, hatred and fear of strangers all increased the risk of violence and murder in the Middle Ages. Even the religious constraints and real belief in Hell's fires, although the probably helped to reduce both, did not cure the endemic violence brought on by this very different medieval stress situation.

For those in power, rivalry and revenge actually increased the risk of a violent end over that of the ordinary man. King Henry I of England (1100–1135) was certainly not the only ruler to sleep with his sword within arm's reach for fear of assassination. Ambition was as rife then as now but the outlets to appease ambition in a society where rank, dignity and wealth depended on birth were extraordinarily few. Aristocratic assassination probably affected most families during the Middle Ages. Many probably took advantage of the battlefield to discreetly carry it out and thus to escape the blame for the crime. The reaction throughout Europe to the murder of Thomas Becket by four royal knights in Canterbury in 1170 was spectacular. Public royal penance, a European cult, mass pilgrimages, countless *vitae*.