CHAPTER 7

John Pecham’s *Commentary on the Rule of the Friars Minor*

Jean-François Godet-Calogerás

1 Introduction: Who is John Pecham?

As for most medieval people, we do not have John Pecham’s date of birth.¹ We do know that he was born in Patcham, a village near Brighton in Sussex in southern England, probably around 1230. He received his first schooling at the nearby Benedictine monastery of Lewes, a Cluniac priory. Then, at a young age, according to one of Pecham’s letters, he went to Paris to study the liberal arts.² He returned to England, and while in Oxford he joined the Friars Minor sometime in the 1250s.³ During those liberal arts years, Pecham may have studied under Roger Bacon. In any case, the influence of Bacon on Pecham’s scientific work is clearly recognized. In the late 1250s, Pecham was then sent to Paris to study theology. He obtained his doctorate in theology in 1269, and in the spring of 1270 became regent master in theology and lector at the Franciscan friary in Paris.

Deeply influenced by Bonaventure and his disciples, John Pecham then taught brilliant young Franciscan friars like Matthew of Acquasparta—future minister general and cardinal—Peter of John Olivi—one of the leading figures

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³ *Letters of Adam Marsh*, vol. 2, 314–315, n. 126, suggests that Pecham entered the order c. 1252.
of the Spirituals—Vital du Four—future provincial minister of Aquitaine and cardinal—Roger Marston—later provincial minister of England—and John of Murrevalle—also future general minister and cardinal. Those years in Paris were a period of high academic activity and scholarly production for Pecham. His teachings gave birth to many writings. He was not shy about getting involved in various doctrinal controversies, and he became one of the most revered Franciscan theologians. In respect to the Augustinian tradition, it is safe to say that Pecham was rather conservative in displaying strong opposition to some of Thomas Aquinas’s propositions, which did not prevent the two from being allies in the controversy between the mendicants and the seculars.4

The last twenty years of Pecham’s life are much better documented. He left Paris around 1271–1272 to return to Oxford and take a teaching position in the Franciscan school.5 Even though his lectures have not been saved, documents suggest that Pecham was well respected and regarded ‘as a valuable member of the theological faculty’.6 He kept his Oxford teaching position for three years until he was elected minister of the English province of the Friars Minor in 1275; a move which may be considered as a consequence of his good reputation. As minister provincial he was known for being austere and ascetic. His fasts were rigorous. He walked barefoot to the general chapter of the order held in Padua in 1276. In his actions as well as in his writings, Pecham showed his concern for the Franciscan spirit of poverty and simplicity.7

In 1277 Pope John xxi appointed John Pecham lector in theology at the papal university in Viterbo. Pecham spent two years there, giving highly appreciated lectures and writing numerous works. Then, in January 1279, Pope Nicholas iii nominated Pecham archbishop of Canterbury.8 Pecham was to succeed some-

4 Douie, Archbishop Pecham, 11–35.
5 See BRUO, 1445–1447.
6 Douie, Archbishop Pecham, 35.
7 Douie, Archbishop Pecham, 42.
8 There is some variation in the dates provided by the sources. Chronicon de Lanercost, 100–101, attests that ‘a domino papa Nicholao publico sermone in conversione sancti Pauli Cantuariensis archiepiscopus denunciatust est, antequam factus’. Another Franciscan witness affirms the date of the papal provision, adding that the episcopal consecration took place on 19 February. Cf. Michael J.P. Robson, ‘A Franciscan contribution to the De gestis Britonum (1205–1279) and its continuation to 1299’, AFH 107 (2014), 308: ‘Anno domini 1278 Nicholaus papa tercius fratrem Iohannem de Pecham, de ordine Minorum, ministrum Anglie, doctorem egregium sacre theologie, compulsit per obedienciam suscipere archiepiscopatum Cantuariensem in festo conversionis Sancti Pauli et in prima dominica Quadragesime proximo sequente eun-