Herbert of Bosham, whose life spans most of the twelfth century, made a name for himself in both ecclesiastical politics and in biblical exegesis.\(^1\) He was born c. 1120 in Bosham, an estuary port on the south coast of England in (now) West Sussex and died in or after 1194. The only snippet of information we possess about his family background suggests that his father entered priesthood after Herbert’s birth.\(^2\) As a young man Herbert left for the schools of Paris to study theology with Peter Lombard, and, like John of Salisbury and other contemporaries of similar educational background and ambitions, afterwards obtained a position as clerk at the Angevin court. Court records reveal that on at least one occasion, in 1157, he acted as diplomatic envoy to Henry II; they also refer to him with the title of *magister* which, although the term at that time was used to denote elementary school masters as well as men who had completed a curriculum of higher study at the schools, here probably means that Herbert was Master in Theology. Since in a letter dating from the later 1170s he mentions plans to begin a school of theology, it seems likely that he also possessed the *licentia docendi*.\(^3\)

During his career at court Herbert met and befriended Thomas Becket. He was present at Becket’s anointment as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1162 and must have entered his service at around the same time. When relations between Henry II and Becket turned sour, Herbert proved himself a staunch supporter of his new patron, and

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\(^1\) For the most recent comprehensive overview of his life, see Frank Barlow’s entry in H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, eds, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: From the Earliest Times to the Year 2000*, 6 (Oxford, 2004), pp. 711–713.


one who seems to have done nothing to diminish the rift between the two opposing parties. He followed Becket into exile to France in 1164 and remained with him until shortly before the archbishop’s murder at Canterbury Cathedral in late 1170. Their years in France, which were largely spent at the abbeys of Saint-Bertin, Pontigny and Saint-Columba’s, outside Sens, with a shorter visit to Saint-Victor, fostered Herbert’s interests in biblical exegesis. As he recalls later in his hagiographical works on Becket, he would act as ‘master of the holy page’ (*in divina pagina magister*) to his patron and they would read the Psalms and the Epistles together.

Becket’s death appears to have brought Herbert’s career in ecclesiastical politics to an abrupt end. The scant pieces of information that emerge about him in the 1170s paint a picture of a man rallying around support for the late archbishop’s canonisation and complaining of being poor and forgotten by the world. Yet it was during this latter period of his life that he produced his major writings. Two of these, titled *Tomus* (“Book” but also a pun on the name Thomas) and *Liber Melorum* (‘Book of Songs’) are hagiographies of Thomas Becket. A third, composed in the early 1170s, honours both his old master at Paris and his late patron with whom he used to study the Holy Page: it is an arrangement of Peter Lombard’s edition of the Great Gloss (*Magna Glosatura*) on the Psalms and the Epistles of Paul. Magnificently executed, the four volumes of this work appear to have been meticulously revised under close supervision of Herbert himself. They were dedicated to William, Archbishop of Sens, then probably his patron, and eventually bequeathed to the Augustinian abbey at Canterbury. Around 1190, almost twenty years after his arrangement of the Gloss, Herbert completed a second commentary, simply titled *Psalter with Commentary* (*Psalterium cum commento*), which focuses on the Psalms only. He was at that time living at the Cistercian abbey of Ourscamp, in the diocese of Arras in Flanders, and had found a new patron in William of Longchamp, bishop of Ely, and possibly in Peter, bishop of Arras, to whom the commentary is dedicated. The last years of Herbert’s life

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5 PL 190:1422; Smalley, *Becket Conflict*, p. 65, n. 23.