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THOMAS AQUINAS

A Very Short Introduction

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Chapter 1

Life and times

The 13th century, sometimes regarded as the great age of Christendom, with everything in Western Europe controlled by the Roman Catholic Church, was, on the contrary, an age of intellectual crisis with much internal dissent. Western Europe was threatened in the east by a totally alien culture and religion. In 1241, at the battle of Liegnitz, in Silesia, the Mongols, who, unexpectedly, advanced no further west, defeated a combined force of Polish conscripts and Bavarian miners. In 1254, Willem van Ruysbroeck, a Flemish Franciscan missionary sent by King Louis IX of France, reached the court of the Great Khan in Karakorum, the Mongol capital, where he debated with Muslim and Buddhist scholars. Giovanni of Monte Corvino (1247–1328), a Franciscan friar from Naples, translated the Psalms and New Testament into Mongolian and presented the result to Kublai Khan. Twenty years younger, if Giovanni had never met Thomas Aquinas in Naples, then he must have known of him.

Tommaso d'Aquino, as he was known to family and neighbours in the native language of the Roman Campagna, became Thomas Aquinas when he entered the Latin-speaking world of the Catholic Church – as he remains in English usage. According to his first biographer, who was present, Thomas died at the then Cistercian monastery of Fossanova on 7 March 1274, in his 49th year. This puts his date of birth to 1224/5. He was born a few miles further



2. The ruins of the family home at Roccasecca

south, nearer Naples, in the family castle at Roccasecca, now a ruin, in what was the county of Aquino, on the border between the Papal States and the territories ruled by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II of the Hohenstaufen dynasty.

Originally from Lombardy, and ultimately of Norman ancestry, which no doubt explains why Thomas was relatively tall and fair, the family had owned Roccasecca since the late 10th century. Thomas's mother Theodora belonged to a Neapolitan family. His father Landolfo was a loyal vassal of Frederick II.

There were at least nine children. Aimo, the eldest son, took part in the expedition to the Holy Land in 1228/9 when Frederick II regained Jerusalem and proclaimed himself King in the Holy Sepulchre Church. On the way home, Aimo was kidnapped by a Christian warlord in Cyprus. Ransomed in 1233 by Pope Gregory IX, he transferred allegiance to the papacy. Rinaldo, nearer Thomas's age, also served on the Emperor's side. He deserted in

1245 when Frederick II was deposed by Pope Innocent IV but was captured and executed for treason. The family regarded Rinaldo as a martyr for the cause of the Church. Marotta, the eldest sister, became a Benedictine nun. One sister died in infancy, struck by lightning, while young Thomas was asleep nearby. Thomas remained close to his sister Theodora. Her husband and father-in-law were implicated in an insurrection against Frederick II. Her father-in-law was caught and executed. Her husband fled to the Papal States but was able to return home after 1268, when Pope Clement IV finally defeated the Hohenstaufen dynasty. In 1272, Thomas was executor of his sister Adelasia's husband's will.

For all his impact on Aquino family life, we have no idea what Thomas thought of Frederick II. His contemporaries knew him as *Stupor mundi*, the 'wonder of the world'. His rule stretched from Sicily to northern Germany. From 1237 until his death in 1250, he was at war with the Popes, first Gregory IX and then Innocent IV, a conflict that grew increasingly bitter, cruel, and treacherous on both sides. Thomas had firsthand experience of the power struggle between Pope and Emperor in which his kinsfolk were deeply and sometimes fatally involved.

Self-effacing as his writing is, Thomas occasionally alludes to his family's military tradition. In connection with the virtue of courage, for example, he unexpectedly cites Vegetius Renuus, the 4th-century AD author of the most studied handbook of Roman military strategy: soldiers may act bravely without the virtue simply because of their training: 'No one fears to do what he is sure he has well learnt' – 'as Vegetius says' (*ST* 2/2.123.1). Perhaps the book was in his father's library at Roccasecca. Elsewhere Thomas writes as if he had dipped into the *Strategemata* of Sextus Julius Frontinus (c. AD 40–193, governor of Britain 75–78), an anthology for the use of military leaders: it would be immoral to deceive the enemy by lying, but one may lawfully use subterfuge in just wars (*ST* 2/2.40.3).

More broadly, Thomas compares the ascetical practices by which novices are inducted into monastic life with the training to which recruits in the military are subjected. Again, noting that we can get angry irrationally, he remarks that ‘a writer may throw down his pen and a rider beat his horse’, spontaneously comparing his own studious experience with the outdoor life of his brothers (*ST* 1/2.46.7). Again, he recalls that there is one law for the military and another for merchants: when a knight is deprived of his status he falls under the law relating to peasants or tradesmen – perhaps a hint there of his family’s position in the feudal hierarchy (*ST* 1/2.91.6).

On the whole, however, Thomas ignores the wider turmoil in which his family was embroiled. He acknowledges the possibility of establishing a religious order of monks to fight for the Holy Land (*ST* 2/2.188.3), for example, but never considers the morality of the crusades, as we might have expected. (One of the pleasures of reading a medieval author is to discover what it never occurred to him or her to discuss.) Going on crusade was a fact of life, presumably, which raised no theological questions. In the early 1240s, in Paris, Thomas must have been aware of the preparations for the crusade to be led by his austere and pious patron and admirer King Louis IX. Much later, in a seminar, asked whether risking one’s wife’s chastity by going on crusade without her was justified, Thomas replies that, if she has good reason not to come, and is not willing to be chaste in one’s absence, one should not go – which sounds dismayingly like celibate male jocularly.

Unsurprisingly, in connection with waging war, Thomas considers whether soldiering is always a sin (*ST* 2/2.40.1). Early Christians regarded military life, with its commitment to shedding blood on occasion, as unacceptable. By his day, however, soldiering was acceptable. He sets out three conditions for making war lawfully. First, only a prince may initiate military action. Second, there must be a just cause: the enemy must have violated the rights of one’s community. Third, the intention of those making war must be

right: they must intend to promote good or avoid evil. In effect, going to war to redress an injury must not be likely to do more harm than leaving the injury unaddressed. Thus Thomas endorses the just war ethics that had been standard since Augustine of Hippo (354–430).

Thomas says surprisingly little about the relationship between Church and state, despite intense discussion among canon lawyers at the time. Besides the local conflict in which the family was involved, he must have been aware of the Investiture Controversy, the long-running dispute between the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope, formally settled in 1122, over who should invest bishops and abbots with their rings and crosiers. In his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, early in his career, he states that the Pope, in virtue of his office, is spiritual head of the Church: every political addition to this essentially spiritual authority is an historical accident. Thomas shows little interest in the political role of the papacy. Again, however, he may have taken it for granted.

Thomas must have been aware of legislation promulgated in 1231 by Frederick II in which blasphemy, games of chance, adultery, prostitution, and the dispensing of love-potions were made punishable offences. His brothers must have joked about it. In 1254, more challengingly, he could not have failed to reflect on the legislation passed by Louis IX providing for the punishment of heretics and those sheltering them but also against taking the holy name in cursing or swearing, engaging in games of chance, gambling, and suchlike, in effect seeking to enforce morality by law. A deeply religious man, Louis IX built the Sainte Chapelle in Paris (c. 1245–8) to house Christ's crown of thorns. He was to die at Tunis, in 1270, on a second crusade to the Holy Land. To back his decision to repress vice by legislation, he appealed to Christian principles. Interestingly, however, while Thomas argued that the purpose of law is to make human beings good (*ST* 1/2.95), he denied that legislation was always the right way to control vice (*ST* 1/2.96). On the contrary, legislation should concern 'only the

more grievous vices' – which these are he leaves to the judgement of reason.

There is less evidence in his work of Thomas's early monastic formation, or rather, it is so pervasive as to be almost invisible. In 1230/1, Thomas was sent to school at the nearby Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino, ten miles east of Roccasecca, at first with his own servant. Founded about 529 by Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–c. 550) the monastery was, and remains, the cradle of Western monasticism. Rebuilt after Allied bombing in 1944, the abbey that Thomas knew was ruined in 1349 by an earthquake. His father made a donation to repair two mills on the abbey estate, the profit from which was to pay for an annual banquet for the monks. He may have hoped that his youngest son would eventually become abbot. For the next seven or eight years, Thomas was immersed in Latin liturgical and biblical-patristic culture, no doubt learning swathes of the Bible by heart – the Vulgate, of course; Thomas never learned Greek, let alone Hebrew. He frequently quotes from the Apocrypha, particularly the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus, the writings received from Hellenistic Judaism, and rejected by the Protestant leadership at the Reformation.

Thomas discusses whether children under the age of puberty (14 for boys, 12 for girls, he thinks) should be admitted as monks or nuns: with permission of their parents they may be accepted as oblates, to be educated (as he himself was); they may not be professed, however, until they have the full use of reason, are able to exercise free will, and are therefore no longer under their fathers' dominion (*ST* 2/2.189.5). If parents are in such need that they cannot be properly supported without the help of their children, then, according to Church law, these children may not become monks or nuns (*ST* 2/2.189.6). To the argument that one should not enter monastic life without first discussing it with friends, Thomas grants, citing Aristotle, that long deliberation and the advice of others are necessary in such life-defining decisions; but he goes on to cite Scripture against bowing to the wishes of one's

family, when one has no doubt about one's call from God (*ST* 2/2.189.10). His family did their best to prevent Thomas from joining the Order of Preachers: since he was by then at least 18 years of age, he did not need his father's permission. It is a standard topic in ecclesiastical law: Thomas must have had feelings about the matter, though he remains characteristically dispassionate.

The next phase in his education was dramatic. In March 1239, hostilities between the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope intensified. Frederick II's troops occupied Monte Cassino. Thomas's father was one of the officers entrusted with guarding prisoners captured at the battle of Cortenuova, some 18 months previously, when, with up to 10,000 Apulian Muslim archers, Frederick II defeated the city states in Lombardy. In the fall of 1239, Landolfo dispatched his son down the road to Naples, to study the liberal arts at the new university, the first founded independently of the Church, by Frederick II, to train officials for the imperial service. At this point his father obviously had no qualms about allowing Thomas to study in a well-known anti-papal environment. Here Thomas would meet the Dominican friars, something the family did not anticipate or welcome.

Thomas presumably studied the seven liberal arts: Aristotle's logic, grammar in classical Latin texts, rhetoric through Cicero, arithmetic, music and harmonic theory, Euclid's geometry, and Ptolemy's astronomy. Less conventionally, he was introduced to Aristotle's natural philosophy, which was still banned in papally founded universities, as at Paris, by a certain Peter of Ireland (c. 1200–60). His commentary on Aristotle's *On Interpretation* seems to have been at hand when Thomas composed his own commentary, back in Naples, about 30 years later.

The college at Naples was only a satellite of the Latin, Jewish, and Muslim cultures that interacted in Frederick II's court in Palermo. Michael Scot (1175–1232?), who learned Arabic at Toledo, settled in Palermo, where he translated Aristotle (from Arabic into

Latin) as well as commentaries on Aristotle by the great Spanish Muslim scholar Ibn Rushd (1126–98), whom the Latins called Averroes. Even if Naples was only an outpost, the significant thing is that, immersed for a decade in traditional monasticism, by the time he was 20 Thomas had also been exposed to the exotic culture that was opening up more freely and fully than ever before: the world of Aristotle, largely unknown in the West, communicated through translation from Arabic, with Islamic commentaries and interpretations. He was never to leave this inheritance behind.

In Naples, about 1242/3, Thomas decided to join the Dominican friars. Founded by the Spaniard Dominic (c. 1172–1221) a quarter of a century earlier, the Order of Preachers originated in the attempt by the Catholic Church to combat the widespread heresy of the Albigensians (see Chapter 3). Like the Franciscans, founded about the same time, Dominican friars – from the Latin *fratres*, ‘brothers’ – were a novelty, a new kind of monk, living in cities rather than in remote rural estates; clergy yet not under the immediate jurisdiction of the local bishop; thus something of a threat to the ecclesiastical establishment, with a system of governance based on frequent elections and fixed short terms in office. Thomas could not have been attracted by Dominican liturgy and conventual life, however – it did not exist in Naples, as since 1239 Frederick II had allowed only two friars to remain in the city. Thomas was clothed as a novice, probably in April 1244, by Tommaso Agni, who was to die in 1277 as Latin patriarch of Jerusalem – another indication of the spacious world that Thomas inhabited. The Aquino family were horrified. Seemingly at his mother’s behest, Thomas was kidnapped by a squad of Frederick II’s soldiers, including his brother Rinaldo, and kept prisoner for over a year, probably at Roccasecca, until, seeing his determination (he resisted the prostitute whom they introduced into his apartment), he was allowed to return to the Dominicans.

Why was Thomas drawn to join the Dominican friars? Thomas remained loyal to Monte Cassino in his own way, right to the end:

dictated in mid-February 1274 probably in his sister's home at Maenza, his last act as a theologian was to reply to a request by the abbot to explain a passage in Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) about the relationship between divine and human freedom – yet clearly he did not want to spend the rest of his life as a monk at Monte Cassino. The likeliest thing is that he was excited by the whole new intellectual world opened up to him at Naples. Late in life, comparing forms of monastic life with one another, he contended that there is nothing better than an order instituted 'for contemplation and communicating the fruits of contemplation to others by teaching and preaching' (*ST* 2/2.188.7). That sounds like the Dominican Order's ideal.

Thomas was dispatched to Paris. The distance from Naples to Paris is over 1,000 miles. Friars were forbidden from travelling on horseback, though he may not have walked all the way. On this, as on later occasions, he perhaps embarked at Civitavecchia, sailing to Aigues-Mortes then up the Rhône by boat.

In Paris, Thomas attended lectures, notably by his older confrere the Suabian Dominican Albert the Great (d. 1280, over 80 years old), one of the greatest scholars of the Middle Ages. The transcript in his own hand that Thomas made of Albert's lectures on Dionysius the Areopagite survives. He attended Albert's course on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In 1248, he accompanied Albert to Cologne, to set up a new study centre. They arrived in time to witness the laying of the foundation stone of Cologne cathedral. During this period, Thomas must have been ordained priest, though no record survives.

In 1252, Thomas returned to Paris. The theology faculty was riven with strife. The 'secular masters', the diocesan clergy who occupied the principal chairs in theology and law, detested the friars. Being mostly from northern France and Belgium, they resented the advent of these interlopers, parachuted into the faculty for a few years, with allegiances elsewhere and particularly to the papacy. It



6. Albert the Great, Thomas's teacher, 1352, by Tommaso da Modena

did not help that, in 1254, the Sicilian Franciscan Gerard of Borgo San Donnino (c. 1220–76) published a book proclaiming that the third age of the world had begun, implying that the friars were the prophets of this 'new age'. The work was declared heretical, all copies to be burnt. Thomas's allusions are as discreet as usual, but

he cannot have been indifferent to this episode. Writing much later, he states that the New Law of the Gospel is already nothing less than ‘the grace of the Holy Spirit given inwardly to Christ’s faithful’, thus ruling out the idea of any further ‘dispensation of the Holy Spirit when spiritual men will reign’. This response to the apocalypticism of Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135–1202) is probably aimed at the same ideas as reformulated and exaggerated by Gerard (cf. *ST* 1/2.106).

Thomas left Paris for Naples at the end of 1259, not expecting ever to return. He spent the years from 1261 to 1265 at Orvieto. He was commissioned by Pope Urban IV to compose the liturgy for the Feast of Corpus Christi. The papal court was a centre of scholarly endeavour. Albert the Great was in residence, as well as Giovanni Campano of Novara (1220–96), the mathematician who brought out a new version of Euclid’s *Elements*, at Urban’s request. Thomas began the *Catena aurea* – the ‘golden chain’, as it was affectionately known – by far the most read of Thomas’s works well into the 16th century: ‘Perhaps nearly perfect as a conspectus of Patristic interpretation’, as John Henry Newman wrote in 1841, introducing the English translation. ‘Other compilations exhibit research, industry, learning; but this, though a mere compilation, evinces a masterly command over the whole subject of Theology.’ It is an immense anthology of patristic texts, culled no doubt from the library at Monte Cassino among other places.

In 1265, Thomas was assigned by the Order to establish a study house at Santa Sabina on the Aventine hill, the splendid 5th-century basilica given to Saint Dominic in 1221 and still the headquarters of the Dominican Order. Thomas began to write his greatest work, the *Summa Theologiae*. In July 1268, however, Conradin, Frederick II’s grandson, invaded Rome: Santa Sabina was sacked by his troops.

Returning to Paris for a second stint as professor, Thomas found himself in the midst of a crisis provoked by the impact of Aristotle’s



7. Cologne cathedral towers, woodcut, 1548

works. For the rest of Thomas's life there would be hostility between members of the arts faculty (clergy, of course) and many, perhaps the majority, in the theology faculty, over how to deal with the new ideas. At some point he decided to integrate Aristotle with Christian doctrine. In June 1272, his term over, Thomas returned to Naples, to continue his commentaries on Aristotle, to write up his lectures on the Epistles of St Paul, and to complete the *Summa Theologiae*.

The best clue to what he was thinking, when he returned from Paris to Naples in 1272, lies in the letter of condolence that the professors in the arts faculty at Paris sent to the Dominican Order in May 1274: ‘For news has come to us which floods us with grief and amazement, bewilders our understanding, transfixes our very vitals, and well-nigh breaks our hearts’ – there was no such letter from the theology faculty! They piously asked for Thomas’s bones for interment in Paris but also, with more chance of success, for ‘some writings of a philosophical nature, begun by him at Paris, left unfinished at his departure, but completed, we have reason to believe, in the place to which he was transferred’. Thomas had promised them translations of the following three works: Simplicius on Aristotle’s *De anima*, Proclus on Plato’s *Timaeus*, and *De aquarum conductibus et ingeniis erigendis*. This last seems to have been the *Pneumatics*, composed by Hero (or Heron) of Alexandria (fl. AD c. 10–70), a fascinating catalogue of mechanical devices working by air, steam, or water pressure. Simplicius of Cilicia (AD c. 490–c. 560), one of the last pagan Neoplatonists, wrote a good deal on Aristotle. Proclus belonged to the last generation of pagan Neoplatonists: his commentary on the *Timaeus*, one of the few dialogues of Plato available in Thomas’s day, was regarded as uniquely valuable. It is striking that the philosophers at Paris expected Thomas to be in a position to procure these works for them; we have no idea what he made of them himself, fascinating as it is to see that he was at least regarded as at home in this intellectual milieu.

Thomas had also promised them ‘new writings of his own on logic, such as, when he was about to leave us, we took the liberty of asking him to write’. Thomas’s commentary on Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, begun in Paris and completed in Naples, was sent to Paris, together with his commentary on the *Peri hermenias*, started in Paris but never finished. There is no evidence that members of the Paris theology faculty ever asked Thomas to write anything for them.

On 6 December 1273, however, the Feast of Saint Nicholas, something happened during the celebration of Mass. The result was that he decided to write no more: ‘Everything I have written seems to me as straw in comparison with what I have seen.’ Presumably he had some kind of mystical experience. According to recent commentators, he perhaps suffered a stroke, likely enough after years of overwork. On the other hand, he was summoned to take part in the forthcoming Council of the Church due to open at Lyons. He started out, fell ill on the way, and stopped off with his kinsfolk. He moved to Fossanova so that he might die in a monastery. He was nevertheless still clear-headed enough, as we have noted, to dictate a letter to the abbot of Monte Cassino. Leaving the *Summa Theologiae* unfinished should be regarded as a decision by a theologian who knew all along that what could be said about God could never be finished, or even stated adequately. Thomas decided to write no more, he was not forced to stop by physical or mental breakdown or by death.

Interred at Fossanova, Thomas’s remains were moved in 1369, at Pope Urban V’s behest, to Toulouse (not that Thomas was ever there). Since 1974 his bones have been housed in the fine 13th-century Church of the Jacobins, splendidly restored, and now a state-run museum.