Henry II of England

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Henry II, called Curtmantle (5 March 1133 – 6 July 1189) ruled as King of England (1154–1189), Count of Anjou, Duke of Normandy, Duke of Aquitaine, Duke of Gascony, Count of Nantes, Lord of Ireland and, at various times, controlled parts of Wales, Scotland and western France. Henry was the first of the House of Plantagenet to rule England and was the great-grandson of William the Conqueror.

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Early life

Henry II was born in Le Mans, France, on 5 March 1133, the first day of the traditional year.[1] His father, Geoffrey V of Anjou (Geoffrey Plantagenet), was Count of Anjou and Count of Maine. His mother, Empress Matilda, was a claimant to the English throne as the daughter of Henry I (1100–1135), son of William, Duke of Normandy. He spent his childhood in his father's land of Anjou. At the age of nine, Robert, 1st Earl of Gloucester took him to England where he received education from Master Matthew at Bristol.

Marriage and children

On 18 May 1152, at Bordeaux Cathedral, at the age of 19, Henry married Eleanor of Aquitaine. The wedding was "without the pomp or ceremony that befitted their rank," partly because only two months previously Eleanor's marriage to Louis VII of France had been annulled. Their relationship, always stormy, eventually died: After Eleanor encouraged her children to rebel against their father in 1173, Henry had her placed under house arrest, where she remained for fifteen years.

Henry II

King of the English; Lord of Ireland

Reign 25 October 1154 – 6 July 1189
Coronation 19 December 1154
Predecessor Stephen "of Blois"
Junior king Henry the Young King
Successor Richard I "the Lionheart"
Spouse Eleanor of Aquitaine
Issue William, Count of Poitiers
Henry the Young King
Geoffrey, Duke of Brittany
Matilda, Duchess of Saxony
Leonora, Queen of Castile
Joan, Queen of Sicily
John "Lackland"

House House of Plantagenet
Father Geoffrey V, Count of Anjou
Mother Matilda of England
Born 5 March 1133
Le Mans, France
Died 6 July 1189 (aged 56)
Chinon, France
Burial Fontevraud Abbey, France
Henry and Eleanor had eight children, William, Henry, Richard, Geoffrey, John, Matilda, Eleanor, and Joan. William died in infancy. As a result Henry was crowned as joint king when he came of age. However, because he was never King in his own right, he is known as "Henry the Young King", not Henry III. In theory, Henry would have inherited the throne from his father, Richard his mother's possessions, Geoffrey would have Brittany and John would be Lord of Ireland. However, fate would ultimately decide much differently.

It has been suggested by John Speed's 1611 book, History of Great Britain, that another son, Philip, was born to the couple. Speed's sources no longer exist, but Philip would presumably have died in early infancy.[4]

Henry also had illegitimate children. While they were not valid claimants, their Royal blood made them potential problems for Henry's legitimate successors.[5] William Longespée was one such child. He remained largely loyal and contented with the lands and wealth afforded to him as a royal bastard. Geoffrey, Bishop of Lincoln, Archbishop of York, on the other hand, was seen as a possible thorn in the side of Richard I of England.[5] Geoffrey had been the only son to attend Henry II on his deathbed, after even the King's favourite, John Lackland, deserted him.[6] Richard forced him into the clergy at York, thus ending his secular ambitions.[5] Another son, Morgan was elected to the Bishopric of Durham, although he was never consecrated due to opposition from Pope Innocent III.[7]

For a complete list of Henry's descendants, see List of members of the House of Plantagenet.

**Appearance**

Several sources record Henry's appearance. They all agree that he was very strong, energetic and surpassed his peers athletically.

...he was strongly built, with a large, leonine head, freckle fiery face and red hair cut short. His eyes were grey and we are told that his voice was harsh and cracked, possibly because of the amount of open-air exercise he took. He would walk or ride until his attendants and courtiers were worn out and his feet and legs were covered with blistered and sores... He would perform all athletic feats.

John Harvey (Modern)

...the lord king has been red-haired so far, except that the coming of old age and grey hair has altered that colour somewhat. His height is medium, so that neither does he appear great among the small, nor yet does he seem small among the great... curved legs, a horseman's shins, broad chest, and a boxer's arms all announce him as a man strong, agile and bold... he never sits, unless riding a horse or eating... In a single day, if necessary, he can run through four or five day-marches and, thus foiling the plots of his enemies, frequently mocks their plots with surprise sudden arrivals... Always are in his hands bow, sword, spear and arrow, unless he be in council or in books.

Peter of Blois (Contemporary)

A man of reddish, freckled complexion, with a large, round head, grey eyes that glowed fiercely and grew bloodshot in anger, a fiery countenance and a harsh, cracked voice. His neck was poked forward slightly from his shoulders, his chest was broad and square, his arms strong and powerful. His body was stocky, with a pronounced tendency toward fatness, due to nature rather than self-indulgence - which he tempered with exercise.
Character

Like his grandfather, Henry I of England, Henry II had an outstanding knowledge of the law. A talented linguist and excellent Latin speaker, he would sit on councils in person whenever possible. His interest in the economy was reflected in his own frugal lifestyle. He dressed casually except when tradition dictated otherwise and ate a sparing diet.[8]

He was modest and mixed with all classes easily. "He does not take upon himself to think high thoughts, his tongue never swells with elated language; he does not magnify himself as more than man."[9] His generosity was well-known and he employed a Templar to distribute one tenth of all the food bought to the royal court amongst his poorest subjects.

Henry also had a good sense of humour and was never upset at being the butt of the joke. Once while he sat sulking and occupying himself with needlework, a courtier suggested that he looked like a tanner's daughter. The King rocked with laughter and even explained the joke to those who did not immediately grasp it.[10]

"His memory was exceptional: he never failed to recognize a man he had once seen, nor to remember anything which might be of use. More deeply learned than any King of his time in the western world".[8]

Construction of an empire

see also Henry II's 1157 Welsh Campaign and The Great Welsh Revolt of 1166

Henry's claims by blood and marriage

Henry's father, Geoffrey Plantagenet, held rich lands as a vassal from Louis VII of France. Maine and Anjou were therefore Henry's by birthright, amongst other lands in Western France.[2] By maternal claim, Normandy was also to be his. However, the most valuable inheritance Henry received from his mother was a claim to the English throne. Granddaughter of William I of England, Empress Matilda should have been Queen, but was usurped by her cousin, Stephen I of England. Henry's efforts to restore the royal line to his own family would create a dynasty spanning three centuries and thirteen Kings.

Henry's marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine placed him firmly in the ascendancy.[2] His plentiful lands were added to his new wife's possessions, giving him control of Aquitaine and Gascony. The riches of the markets and vineyards in these regions, combined with Henry's already plentiful holdings, made Henry the most powerful vassal in France.
Taking the English Throne

Realising Henry's royal ambition was far from easily fulfilled, his mother had been pushing her claim for the crown for several years to no avail, finally retiring in 1147. It was 1147 when Henry had accompanied Matilda on an invasion of England. It soon failed due to lack of preparation,[2] but it made him determined that England was his mother's right, and so his own. He returned to England again between 1149 and 1150. On 22nd May 1149 he was knighted by King David I of Scotland, his great uncle, at Carlisle.[11]

Early in January 1153, just months after his wedding, he crossed the Channel one more time. His fleet was 36 ships strong, transporting a force of 3,000 footmen and 140 horses.[12] Sources dispute whether he landed at Dorset or Hampshire, but it is known he entered a small village church. It was 6 January and the locals were observing the Festival of the Three Kings. The correlation between the festivities and Henry's arrival was not lost on them. "Ecce advenit dominator Dominus, et regnum in manu ejus", they exclaimed as the introit for their feast, "Behold the Lord the ruler cometh, and the Kingdom in his hand".[11]

Henry moved quickly and within the year he had secured his right to succession via the Treaty of Wallingford with Stephen of England. He was now, for all intents and purposes, in control of England. When Stephen died in October 1154, it was only a matter of time until Henry's treaty would bear fruit, and the quest that began with his mother would be ended. On 19 December 1154 he was crowned in Westminster Abbey, "By The Grace Of God, Henry II, King Of England".[11] Henry Plantagenet, vassal of Louis VII, was now more powerful than the French King himself.

Lordship over Ireland

See also: Norman invasion of Ireland

Shortly after his coronation, Henry sent an embassy to the newly elected Pope Adrian IV. Led by Bishop Arnold of Lisieux, the group of clerics requested authorisation for Henry to invade Ireland. Most historians agree that this resulted in the papal bull Laudabiliter. It is possible Henry acted under the influence of a "Canterbury plot," in which English ecclesiastics strove to dominate the Irish church.[13] However, Henry may have simply intended to secure Ireland as a lordship for his younger brother William.

William died soon after the plan was hatched and Ireland was ignored. It was not until 1166 that it came to the surface again. In that year, Diarmait Mac Murchada, a minor Irish Prince, was driven from his land of Leinster by the High King of Ireland. Diarmait followed Henry to Aquitaine, seeking an audience. He asked the English king to help him reassert control; Henry agreed and made footmen, knights and nobles available for the cause. The most prominent of these was a Welsh Norman, Richard de Clare, 2nd Earl of Pembroke, nicknamed "Strongbow". In exchange for his loyalty, Diarmait offered Earl Richard his daughter Aoife in marriage and made him heir to the kingdom.

The Normans restored Diarmait to his traditional holdings, but it quickly became apparent that Henry had not offered aid purely out of kindness. In 1171, Henry arrived from France, declaring himself Lord
of Ireland. All of the Normans, along with many Irish princes, took oaths of homage to Henry, and he left after six months. He never returned, but he later named his young son, the future King John of England, Lord of Ireland.

Diarmait's appeal for outside help had made Henry Ireland's Lord, starting 800 years of English overlordship on the island. The change was so profound that Diarmait is still remembered as a traitor of the highest order. In 1172, at the Synod of Cashel, Roman Catholicism was proclaimed as the only permitted religious practice in Ireland.

**Consolidation in Scotland**

In 1174, a rebellion spearheaded by his own sons was not Henry's biggest problem. An invasion force from Scotland, led by their King, William the Lion, was advancing from the North. To make matters worse, a Flemish armada was sailing for England, just days from landing. It seemed likely that the King's rapid growth was to be checked. [1]

Henry saw his predicament as a sign from God, that his treatment of Thomas Becket would be rewarded with defeat. He immediately did penance at Canterbury [1] for the Archbishop's fate and events took a turn for the better.

The hostile armada dispersed in the English Channel and headed back for the continent. Henry had avoided a Flemish invasion, but Scottish invaders were still raiding in the North. Henry sent his troops to meet the Scots at Alnwick, where the English scored a devastating victory. William was captured in the chaos, removing the figurehead for rebellion, and within months all the problem fortresses had been torn down. Southern Scotland was now completely dominated by Henry, another fief in his Angevin Empire, that now stretched from the Solway Firth almost to the Mediterranean and from the Somme to the Pyrenees. By the end of this crisis, and his sons' revolt, the King was "left stronger than ever before". [6]

**Domestic policy**

**Dominating nobles**

During Stephen's reign, the barons in England had undermined Royal authority. Rebel castles were one problem, nobles avoiding military service was another. The new King immediately moved against the illegal fortresses that had sprung up during Stephen's reign, having them torn down.

To counter the problem of avoiding military service, Scutage became common. This tax, paid by Henry's barons instead of serving in his army, allowed the King to hire mercenaries. These hired troops were used to devastating effect by both Henry and his son Richard, and by 1159 the tax was central to the King's army and his authority over vassals.

**Legal reform**

Henry II's reign saw the establishment of Royal Magistrate courts. This allowed court officials under
authority of the Crown to adjudicate on local disputes, reducing the workload on Royal courts proper and delivering justice with greater efficiency.

Henry also worked to make the legal system fairer. Trial by ordeal and trial by combat were still common and even in the 12th century these methods were outdated. By the Assize of Clarendon, in 1166, a precursor to trial by jury became the standard. However, this group of "twelve lawful men," as the Assize commonly refers to it, provides a service more similar to a grand jury, alerting court officials to matters suitable for prosecution. Trial by combat was still legal in England until 1819, but Henry's support of juries was a great contribution to the country's social history. The Assize of Northampton, in 1176, cemented the earlier agreements at Clarendon.

Religious policy

Strengthening royal control over the Church

In the tradition of Norman kings, Henry II was keen to dominate the church like the state. At Clarendon Palace on 30 January 1164, the King set out sixteen constitutions, aimed at decreasing ecclesiastical interference from Rome. Secular courts, increasingly under the King's influence, would also have jurisdiction over clerical trials and disputes. Henry's authority guaranteed him majority support, but the newly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury refused to ratify the proposals.

Henry was characteristically stubborn and on 8 October 1164, he called the Archbishop, Thomas Becket, before the Royal Council. However, Becket had fled to France and was under the protection of Henry's rival, Louis VII of France.

The King continued doggedly in his pursuit of control over his clerics, to the point where his religious policy became detrimental to his subjects. By 1170, the Pope was considering excommunicating all of Britain. Only Henry's agreement that Becket could return to England without penalty prevented this fate.

Murder of Thomas Becket

"What miserable drones and traitors have I nurtured and promoted in my household who let their lord be treated with such shameful contempt by a low-born cleric!" were the words which sparked the darkest event in Henry's religious wranglings. This speech has translated into legend in the form of "Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?" - a provocative statement which would perhaps have been just as riling to the knights and barons of his household at whom it was aimed as his actual words. Bitter at Becket, his old friend, constantly thwarting his clerical constitutions, the King shouted in anger but most likely not with intent. However, four of Henry's knights, Reginald Fitzurse, Hugh de Moreville, William de Tracy, and Richard le Breton overheard their King's cries and decided to act on his words.

On 29 December 1170, they entered Canterbury Cathedral, finding Becket near the stairs to the crypt. They beat down the Archbishop, killing him with several blows. Becket's brains were scattered upon the ground with the words; "Let us go, this fellow will not be getting up again." Whatever the rights and wrongs, it certainly tainted Henry's later reign. For the remaining 20 years of his rule, he would personally regret the death of a man who "in happier times...had been a friend".

[14]
Just three years later, Becket was canonized and revered as a martyr against secular interference in God's church; Pope Alexander III had declared Thomas Becket a saint. Plantagenet historian John Harvey believes "The martyrdom of Thomas Becket was a martyrdom which he had repeatedly gone out of his way to seek...one cannot but feel sympathy towards Henry".[14] Wherever the true intent and blame lies, it was yet another failure in Henry's religious policy, an arena which he seemed to lack adequate subtlety. And politically, Henry had to sign the Compromise of Avranches which removed from the secular courts almost all jurisdiction over the clergy.

The Angevin Curse

Civil war and rebellion

“It is the common fate of sons to be misunderstood by their fathers, and of fathers to be unloved of their sons, but it has been the particular bane of the English throne.”[15]

The "Angevin Curse" is infamous amongst the Plantagenet rulers. Trying to divide his lands amongst numerous ambitious children resulted in many problems for Henry. The King's plan for an orderly transfer of power relied on Young Henry ruling and his younger brothers doing homage to him for land. However, Richard refused to be subordinate to his brother, because they had the same mother and father, and the same Royal blood.[5]

In 1173, Young Henry and Richard moved against their father and his succession plans, trying to secure the lands they were promised. The King's changing and revising of his inheritance nurtured jealousy in his offspring, which turned to aggression. While both Young Henry and Richard were relatively strong in France, they still lacked the manpower and experience to trouble their father unduly. The King crushed this first rebellion and was fair in his punishment, Richard for example, lost half of the revenue allowed to him as Count of Poitou.[5]

In 1182, the Plantagenet children's aggression turned inward. Young Henry, Richard and their brother Geoffrey all began fighting each other for their father's possessions on the continent. The situation was exacerbated by French rebels and the French King, Philip Augustus. This was the most serious threat to come from within the family yet, and the King faced the dynastic tragedy of civil war. However, on 11 June 1183, Henry the Young King died. The uprising, which had been built around the Prince, promptly collapsed and the remaining brothers returned to their individual lands. Henry quickly occupied the rebel region of Angoulême to keep the peace.[5]

The final battle between Henry's Princes came in 1184. Geoffrey of Brittany and John of Ireland, the youngest brothers, had been promised Aquitaine, which belonged to elder brother Richard.[5] Geoffrey and John invaded, but Richard had been controlling an army for almost 10 years and was an accomplished military commander. Richard expelled his fickle brothers and they would never again face each other in combat, largely because Geoffrey died two years later, leaving only Richard and John.

Death and succession
The final thorn in Henry's side would be an alliance between his eldest son, Richard, and his greatest rival, Philip Augustus. John had become Henry's favourite son and Richard had begun to fear he was being written out of the King's inheritance. In summer 1189, Richard and Philip invaded Henry's heartland of power, Anjou. The unlikely allies took northwest Touraine, attacked Le Mans and overran Maine and Tours. Defeated, Henry II met his opponents and agreed to all their demands, including paying homage to Philip for all his French possessions.

Weak, ill, and deserted by all but an illegitimate son, Geoffrey, Archbishop of York, Henry died at Chinon on 6 July 1189. His legitimate children, chroniclers record him saying, were "the real bastards." The victorious Prince Richard later paid his respects to Henry's corpse as it travelled to Fontevraud Abbey, upon which, according to Roger of Wendover, 'blood flowed from the nostrils of the deceased, as if...indignant at the presence of the one who was believed to have caused his death'. The Prince, Henry's eldest surviving son and conqueror, was crowned "by the grace of God, King Richard I of England" at Westminster on 1 September 1189.

Ancestry

Descendants

For a list of Henry's direct male-line descendants, see List of members of the House of Plantagenet.

Fictional portrayals

Henry II is a central character in the plays Becket by Jean Anouilh and The Lion in Winter by James Goldman. Peter O'Toole portrayed him in the film adaptations of both of these plays - Becket (1964) and The Lion in Winter (1968) - for both of which he received nominations for the Academy Award for Best Actor. He was also nominated for the BAFTA Award for Best British Actor for Becket and won the Golden Globe Award for Best Actor - Motion Picture Drama for both films. Patrick Stewart portrayed Henry in the TV film adaptation of The Lion in Winter (2003), for which he was nominated for the Golden Globe Award for Best Performance by an Actor in a Mini-Series or Motion Picture Made for Television.

Brian Cox portrayed him in the BBC TV series The Devil's Crown (1978), which dramatised his reign and those of his sons. He has also been portrayed on screen by William Shea in the silent short Becket (1910), A. V. Bramble in the silent film Becket (1923), based on a play by Alfred Lord Tennyson, Alexander Gauge in the film adaptation of the T. S. Eliot play Murder in the Cathedral (1952), and Dominic Roche in the British children's TV series Richard the Lionheart (1962).

Henry II is a significant character in the historical fiction/medieval murder mysteries, Mistress of the Art of Death and The Serpent's Tale by Diana Norman under the pseudonym, Ariana Franklin. He also plays a part in Ken Follet's most popular novel, The Pillars of the Earth, which in its final chapter portrays a fictional account of the King's penance at Canterbury Cathedral for his unknowing role in the murder of Thomas Becket.
Notes

1. ↑ a b c Harvey, The Plantagenets, p.47
2. ↑ a b c d Harvey, The Plantagenets, p.49
3. ↑ Harvey, The Plantagenets, p.51
5. ↑ a b c d e f g h Turner & Heiser, The Reign of Richard Lionheart
6. ↑ a b Harvey, The Plantagenets
8. ↑ a b Harvey, The Plantagenets, p.40
9. ↑ Walter Map, Contemporary
10. ↑ Harvey, The Plantagenets, p.43
11. ↑ a b c Harvey, The Plantagenets, p.50
12. ↑ Harvey, The Plantagenets, p.48
13. ↑ Warren, Henry II
14. ↑ a b John Harvey, The Plantagenets, p.45
15. ↑ Harvey, Richard I, p.58
16. ↑ Simon Schama's A History of Britain, Episode 3, "Dynasty"

References and further reading

- John Harvey, The Plantagenets
- John Harvey, Richard I
- Ralph Turner & Richard Heiser, The Reign of Richard Lionheart

External links

- The Henry Project (http://sbaldw.home.mindspring.com/hproject/henry.htm)
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**French nobility**

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