



Henry II

A brief biography of England's first Plantagenet



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The biography King Henry II



Henry II by Matthew Paris, London British Library, Royal 14 C VII

King Henry II was the great-grandson of William the Conqueror, whose victory at the battle of Hastings in 1066 produced the dynasty of the Norman kings. The Norman kings reigned from 1066 until 1154, when Henry II came to the throne. Henry was the beginning of a new line of kings, known as the Plantagenets. Henry came to the throne following a brutal civil war between King Stephen and Henry's mother, the Empress Matilda. Matilda was supposed to be England's first queen, but after the death of her father Henry I, Stephen swept across the kingdom gathering support and stole the English throne from Matilda. War erupted between the two, and during this Henry became very powerful, and by 1153 had forced King Stephen to make a truce, in which he recognised Henry as the lawful heir to the kingdom. It was during the latter stages of this civil war that Henry first met Thomas Becket, and the two almost immediately became good friends.

Henry was crowned king in December 1154. He was now not only king of England, but also duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and count of Anjou, all French territories along the western coast of France. By the middle of his reign, Henry also controlled Brittany, Maine,

and Toulouse, which were all located in France too.¹ With these French lands, it is said that he controlled more of France than the French king himself!²

He was married to one of the most powerful and influential women of the twelfth century, Eleanor of Aquitaine. It was his marriage to Eleanor that gave him control over Aquitaine, as at this time a husband ruled over all lands that his wife held. The marriage of Henry and Eleanor produced four sons who reached adulthood, namely Henry, Richard, Geoffrey, and John. They also had three daughters, namely Matilda, Eleanor, and Joanna. A family tree can be seen below to show Henry's family and lineage dating back to William the Conqueror.

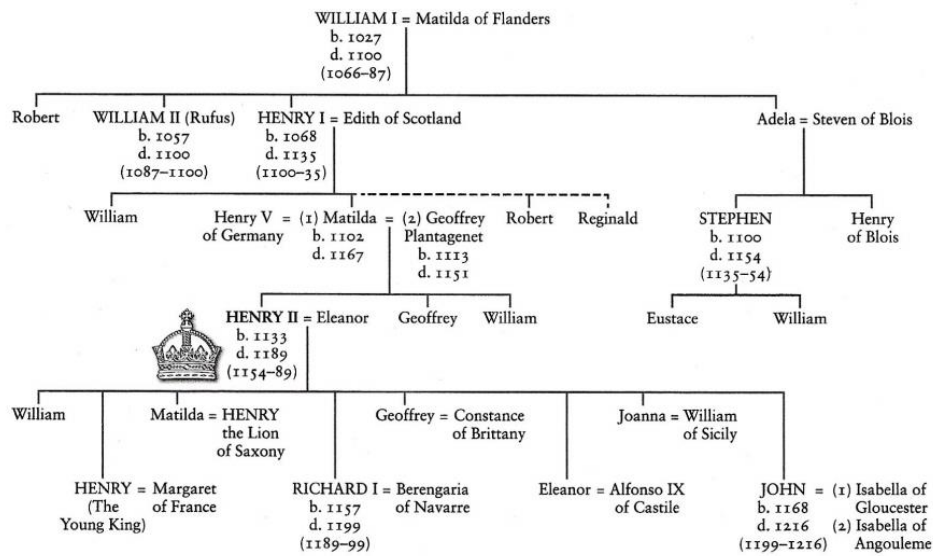


Figure 1: Family tree of king Henry II. Image taken from Richard Barber, *Henry II: A Prince Among Princes*, (London: Penguin, 2015).

Contemporary writers speak of Henry II in a positive manner at the beginning of his reign, with one writer, Gerald of Wales, stating that although the king was often inclined to fly into rages, he was nonetheless a 'most eloquent ruler...literate and learned'.³ This same writer noted that Henry had ginger hair, grey eyes, and was a bulky man, not obese but broad with strength.⁴ With tales of him riding for days without end from one end of his lands to the other, this suggests that he was a force to be reckoned with if encountered on the battlefield.

His reign as king of England was long, spanning some thirty-five years between 1154-1189. As your focus will be on Thomas Becket, Henry's biography here will follow this same pattern. Henry found an England that was ready to embrace him as king when he was crowned in 1154 but he did face a rebellion by his own brother that caused him some issues. Once he was reconciled with his brother, it was a relatively peaceful reign. He made his friend Thomas Becket chancellor of England and following Becket's success at this, Henry made him the archbishop of Canterbury in 1162. This was where the troubles began between the two

¹ Richard Barber, *Henry II: A Prince Among Princes* (London: Penguin, 2015), p. 97.

² Ibid.

³ Gerald of Wales, *Instruction for a Ruler (De Principis Instructione)*, ed. and trans. Robert Bartlett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 545.

⁴ Ibid.

men. Henry was attempting to take money and power from the Church at this time, and bitter arguments between them eventually caused Becket to go into exile.

Henry was very preoccupied with trying to cement good relations with the French king Louis VII while Becket was in exile. When Becket returned five years later, he once more provoked Henry's anger. Almost as soon as Becket had landed, he once again disobeyed the king's wishes, leading to Henry to fly into one of his 'rages'. He is reputed to have uttered the infamous words 'who will rid me of this troublesome priest?' Four knights at Henry's court heard this, and immediately travelled to Canterbury to confront the archbishop. As a result, Becket was murdered inside his own cathedral.

Upon hearing about the death of his old friend, Henry mourned for many days. Murder was not what Henry meant when he flew into a rage. To remove Becket from his office would have been problematic enough; to deal with the aftermath of the murder of the most senior clergyman in England was to be the most difficult task Henry would face. In an attempt to appease many of his critics, Henry punished the four knights responsible for killing the archbishop. This did not make much difference because the political situation involving the kings of England and of France, as well as the pope was very complicated. The Pope threatened to excommunicate the king too. By 1173/4, Henry was facing a rebellion on a massive scale. His own sons began fighting against him after he refused to grant them lands of their own. Eleanor of Aquitaine, Henry's queen, also rebelled against him. He faced an invasion from Scotland, and in his French domains Louis VII, king of France, began attacking the borders of Normandy and Henry's other French possessions.

Becoming desperate, Henry was beginning to panic that his kingship, which had been so successful up until Becket's death, would fail. Still mourning the death of his friend, with his guilt weighing him down, Henry decided to go on a pilgrimage of his own. He arrived in Canterbury in 1174 and walked barefoot in plain clothes from St Dunstan's church, outside of the city walls, all the way to the cathedral. When he arrived at the cathedral, he allowed the monks of the cathedral to whip him at the burial place of his friend in the crypt. This astonishing event, highly unusual in the middle ages, became known as the penance of Henry II. Shortly following the penance, Henry received news that the king of Scotland had been defeated, and his invasion repelled. It was not long before the whole rebellion was over. Henry retained all his lands, and arguably came back stronger than ever. His penance obviously worked, and he was once again reconciled with his friend Thomas Becket, who had appeared to have forgiven him for his faults.

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*Henry with his mother Empress Matilda
Gospels of Henry the Lion*



*Henry II with his wife Queen Eleanor of
Aquitaine*