**Henry II**

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Nicholas Vincent celebrates the founder of the Plantagenet dynasty who was crowned 850 years ago this month.

December 19th, 1154: a reddish haired, quick-tempered and hyper-active young man was crowned at Westminster Abbey as King Henry II. For the previous twenty years, under the reign of the usurper Stephen, the Anglo-Norman realm had been plunged into a civil war fought out between the adherents of Stephen and those of Henry’s mother, the Empress Matilda. Northern England had been seized by the Scots. The Welsh had made substantial advances in the West. Normandy, linked to the English crown since the Conquest of 1066, had been entirely abandoned by King Stephen. England itself had been partitioned between warring baronial factions, each with its own competing and still unresolved claims to land, castles and local power.

Although in December 1154, Henry was generally recognised as the legitimate claimant to the throne, most notably by the English Church, his accession was fraught with perils. Among the Anglo-Norman aristocracy there were many who saw Henry as an outsider: an Angevin princeling, descended via his father, Count Geoffrey Plantagenet of Anjou, from a dynasty that had long been regarded as the principal rival on Normandy’s southern frontier. King Stephen had left a legitimate son, William Earl Warenne, still living in 1154, and Henry himself had two younger brothers who might well have disputed his claims to succeed to all his family’s lands and titles. Asked some years before to judge Henry’s chances of success, St Bernard of Clairvaux is said to have predicted of Henry that ‘from the Devil he came, and to the Devil he will surely go’.

Yet, from what contemporaries termed ‘the shipwreck’, and modern historians have described as ‘the anarchy’ of Stephen’s reign, Henry II was to emerge as one of England’s, indeed as one of Europe’s, greatest kings. The Plantagenet dynasty that he founded was to occupy the throne of England through to 1399 and the eighth successive generation. Henry himself came to rule over the most extensive collection of lands that had ever been gathered together under an English king – an empire in all but name, that stretched from the Cheviots to the Pyrenees, and from Dublin in the west to the frontiers of Flanders and Burgundy in the east.

In part this empire was the product of dynastic accident. From his mother, Matilda, daughter and sole surviving legitimate child of the last Anglo-Norman King, Henry inherited his claim to rule as king in England and as duke in Normandy. From his father, Geoffrey, he succeeded to rule over Anjou, Maine and the Touraine: the counties of the Loire valley that had previously blocked Anglo-Norman ambitions in the South. Rather than share these inherited spoils with his brothers, Henry seized everything for himself. William, his younger brother, was granted a rich but by no means royal estate. Geoffrey, the third brother, threatened rebellion but was bought off with a shortlived grant of the county of Nantes.

Henry, however, was far more than just a fortunate or crafty elder son. Through his own exertions he greatly expanded his family’s territorial claims. In 1152, two years before obtaining the throne of England, he had married Eleanor, heiress to the duchy of Aquitaine and only a few weeks earlier divorced from her previous husband, the Capetian King Louis VII. As effective ruler of Eleanor’s lands, Henry found himself in possession of a vast estate in south-western France, stretching from the Loire southwards through Poitou and Gascony to the frontiers of Spain. Henry’s marriage to Eleanor was regarded as scandalous even by his own courtiers. She was eleven years older than him and was rumoured to have enjoyed extra-marital affairs not only with her own uncle but with Henry’s father, Geoffrey Plantagenet. By temperament she was as fiery as Henry, and as determined to stake her own claims to rule. As a result, Henry’s domestic life was far from tranquil. From 1173 onwards, Eleanor was to be held under house arrest in England, whilst Henry, to judge by the bastard children that he fathered, had long enjoyed the favours of a series of mistresses. Even so, by his marriage, Henry laid the basis of the later claims made by England’s kings to rule over southern France: claims that were to unite Gascony to the English crown as late as the fifteenth century and which were to play a vital role in the history of Anglo-French relations throughout the Middle Ages and beyond.

Besides the lands acquired by inheritance or marriage, Henry made new conquests of his own. In the late 1150s he seized back Northumberland and Cumbria from the Scots, and even persuaded the Scots king Malcolm to accompany him on an expedition against Toulouse. In the following decade, he claimed the overlordship of Brittany and installed one of his younger sons, Geoffrey, there as duke. Most fatefully of all, in 1171, seizing the initiative from a group of freebooting Anglo-Norman adventurers summoned to the aid of Ireland’s warring kings, he launched an expedition of his own across the Irish Sea: virtually the only time that a successful conquest of Ireland was initiated from the British mainland. Dublin was established as a centre of English government, and Henry’s youngest son, John, was promoted as the first English prince to claim rule as lord of Ireland. It is to Henry II, therefore, that England owes much of its future embroilment, not only in French, but in Irish affairs.

No wonder then, that at the Plantagenet court, comparisons were encouraged between Henry’s dominion and that supposedly exercised by the legendary King Arthur. By the late 1170s, Henry ruled an estate that eclipsed anything that had been seen in France since the time of Charlemagne and in Britain since the fall of Rome. In its cultural and political sophistication, Henry’s dominion outshone those of most, if not all, of the ruling dynasties of Christendom. The Capetian kings of France, struggling to maintain their rule over the immediate vicinity of Paris, could only look on in astonished but for the most part impotent amazement.

Henry’s court was widely recognised as a place of marvels and magnificence. To posterity it has bequeathed a quite extraordinary wealth of records, albeit for the most part in writing rather than in stone or pictorial images. Many of the greater building projects with which the King was associated have long disappeared, although enough remains of his work at Dover castle, and in his Angevin homeland at Chinon, to give us some impression of the sheer bravura of his patronage of architecture. Henry was perhaps the first English king to make use of the new science of heraldry, adopting the image of the leopard as his own personal device: testimony to the degree to which an outward display of chivalric values was becoming the norm amongst twelfth-century rulers, whatever their own personal learning or morals. Henry himself is said to have been fluent in Latin and French, and to have understood though not to have spoken English. Certainly he commissioned works of history in French, glorifying the deeds of his Norman ancestors: among the first such vernacular histories composed for an English king, albeit a king who was as much at home in France as in England.

In terms of the written word, Henry’s legacy is truly astonishing. To begin with, we have more than 3,000 royal letters and charters still surviving from his reign, ranging from the tersest of administrative instructions to the most ornate of diplomatic flummery. Only recently gathered together into a printed edition, this represents the largest corpus of charter material surviving for any twelfth-century European king. Henry was a lawmaker as well as a conqueror and administrator. His statutes and assizes not only extended royal jurisdiction over the criminal law, but brought many civil cases, previously judged in baronial courts, into the newly reformed courts of the King. Hence Henry’s claims to be considered ‘the father’ of the English common law. The laws themselves are recorded for us not only by chroniclers, such as Roger of Howden, loosely attached to Henry’s entourage, but by Henry’s own lawyers, most notably in the great treatise on legal procedure attributed to Henry’s justiciar, Ranulf de Glanville. At the Exchequer, Henry’s financial officers maintained detailed annual accounts, known as ‘Pipe Rolls’, which still survive in the National Archives and which supply an extraordinary insight into the King’s wealth. One of Henry’s officials, the treasurer Ralph son of Nigel, even wrote a treatise on royal finance, the so-called Dialogue of the Exchequer: one of the earliest practical guides to financial procedure in European history.

Another man close to Henry’s court, Walter Map, composed a book of anecdotes and reflections on royal government, the so-called Courtiers Trifles, essential to our understanding of how courtly life was conducted as a mixture of intrigue and splendour, terror and entertainment. Even more remarkably, in his treatise on government the Policraticus, written with no great love for the Plantagenets but in the direct shadow of Henry II’s court, John of Salisbury produced the most significant treatise on politics and civil government to have survived since the fall of classical civilisation. No other court in twelfth-century Europe, not even that of the popes, could boast such a range of written memorials. Henry’s talent for administration and for the recruitment of equally talented subordinates was wholly remarkable.

His was not an unbroken catalogue of success. Like many great men, he had few friends and inspired as much resentment as love within his own family. These personal factors were to lead to the two gravest crises of his reign. In December 1170, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket, was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral following a seven-year long dispute with the king over Henry’s claims to authority over the English Church. The four knights who carried out the deed were all close associates of Henry’s court. In killing, or perhaps more accurately in bungling an attempt to arrest Becket, they clearly believed that they were fulfilling the King’s own wish. By Henry’s enemies, most notably by the kings of France, the murder of Becket was exploited as proof that Henry was indeed an ungodly tyrant, sprung ‘from the Devil’ just as St Bernard had proclaimed. Becket had once been Henry’s boon companion, promoted to his archbishopric as a direct result of Henry’s favour. His disgrace in 1164 and his eventual martyrdom were all the more shocking because of this previous close friendship. And yet, in practical terms, the fact that the Becket affair was so personal a one, turning as much upon Becket’s histrionic sense of rejection as upon any wider issues of church and state, was to ensure that after 1170 Henry found it relatively easy to rebuild his relations with the Church. Certainly, throughout his life Henry was a keen devotee of pilgrimages and relics, and an assiduous attender at confession and the Mass. It was Henry who in 1162 had arranged for the canonization of his ancestor, Edward the Confessor, and it was Henry who later persuaded the German emperor to seek the canonization of that paragon of royal virtues, the Emperor Charlemagne. Both gestures were intended to sanctify the very institution of kingship. For all the sound and fury that the Becket dispute generated, Henry emerged after 1170 with an even closer degree of control over the English Church than he had enjoyed during the earlier part of his reign.

The second great crisis followed swiftly after, in 1173. Taking advantage of the hostile propaganda raised by Becket’s murder, Henry’s wife Eleanor and their three eldest sons, Henry, Richard and Geoffrey, rebelled against the King. For a time the outcome of this rebellion, supported by the kings of France and Scotland and by many of the greater barons of England and France, remained in doubt. However, as with the Becket dispute, by 1174 Henry had emerged as clear victor. His wife and sons were either imprisoned or forced to beg for forgiveness. The earls of Leicester and Chester who had led the rebellion in England were placed under close arrest and, as a result of the confiscations that ensued, the King found himself for the first time in English history with a clear advantage in terms of the sheer number of castles now under royal, as opposed to baronial, control. It was in the direct aftermath of the rebellion of 1173-74 that Henry issued some of his most important legislative assizes and introduced some of his more significant reforms in administration, not as a sop to hostile baronial opinion but as an advertisement of his own ever more puissant authority. Although throughout the 1180s, Henry’s sons continued to rebel, so that by the time of the King’s death in July 1189, Henry found himself out-manoeuvred by a coalition supported not only by the young Philip of France but by his own sons, Richard and John, he went to his grave at the great Angevin abbey at Fontevraud still king of England and still possessed of more power and wider estates than any predecessor upon the English throne.

Not surprisingly Henry’s reign continues to inspire debate. Two of the most hotly disputed issues are closely related: the extent to which Henry governed an ‘empire’ or merely a haphazard collection of estates, and the degree to which his failure to control his unruly sons represented a real lapse in his claims to greatness. Historians have pointed out that Henry possessed no truly imperial jurisdiction applied uniformly across his dominions. Instead, each of the regions that he governed continued to maintain its own customs and it own residual local focuses of power. Thus Ireland was governed differently from Anjou, while England possessed an administrative machinery distinct from that of Normandy. To some extent, there may have been deliberate design in this, since, as a contemporary chronicler reports, Henry’s father had warned him to respect the diverse laws and customs of his lands, and to preserve in equal measure the Angevin customs of Anjou, and the Norman and English customs of Normandy and England. In part too, the debate over Henry’s ‘empire’ turns upon an anachronistic, modern definition of ‘empire’ or ‘imperium’: a concept that was less strictly defined in the twelfth century and that most contemporaries would have had no difficulty in attributing to Henry II’s rule. The debate over the reality of Henry’s ‘empire’ is also motivated by a significant element of hindsight. In 1204, only fifty years after Henry’s accession, his youngest son, King John, was to lose Normandy, Anjou and most of Poitou, leaving only Gascony and the Channel Islands as faded reminders of his father’s once great French estate. Were these events of John’s reign an inevitable consequence of Henry’s attempts to govern a far-flung dominion through inadequate means, relying upon local officials and in the last resort upon the force of his own autocratic personality?

Here, the question of Henry’s relations with his sons can usefully be brought to our aid, since as all historians agree, the fact that Henry faced such regular rebellion by his sons can be traced directly to the way in which he made frequent but mutually contradictory dispositions of his estate during his own lifetime. Thus in 1170 his eldest son Henry was promised rule over England and Normandy and crowned as king in his father’s lifetime, but was never permitted to exercise practical authority. The second son, Richard, was at first promoted as ruler of Aquitaine and Poitou, but on the death of his elder brother was promised England and Normandy provided that he abandon his claims in southern France. In both cases, disappointed prospects led to filial rebellion. In all of this, Henry himself can be accused of indecision and double-dealing. What cannot be denied, however, is that at no point during his reign, at least until the death of his third son Geoffrey in the mid-1180s, did he conceive of bequeathing his estate intact to any one of his offspring. Henry’s empire was always intended for partition. In these circumstances, it becomes easier to understand why he made no attempt to standardise administration across England, Ireland and France. The new collection of his letters and charters, for example, suggests that south of Loire the King issued virtually no charters or writs, certainly far fewer than survive even for such an administrative backwater as Ireland, and this despite the fact that Aquitaine was potentially one of the richer parts of his empire. The reason for this appears not to lie in any lack of imperial philosophy but in the fact that Henry’s rule in Aquitaine was regarded as a mere regency on behalf of his wife. To this extent, Henry never sought to weld Aquitaine into a uniform administrative whole. Like other parts of his ‘empire’, Aquitaine formed part of a much looser imperial system than the modern concept of ‘empire’ can easily accommodate. The empire that stretched from the Cheviots to the Pyrenees and that in Victorian atlases is invariably and appropriately coloured in imperial red, was in reality a kaleidoscopic collage of shades and shadows, in which royal power loomed far more darkly in some places than in others.

Just as the Victorian idea of Henry II as founder of England’s first empire requires revision, so the old idea of Henry as a constitutionalist, singlehandedly fathering the birth of the English common law has few modern adherents. Not only is it now recognised that Henry built upon a far surer foundation of English and Norman legal custom than was once supposed, but the Angevin kings – Henry II and his sons Richard and John – are today regarded as bearing far more similarity to early-medieval rulers than nineteenth-century constitutional historians cared to admit. Henry II was as much a lawbreaker as a lawmaker, prepared to recognise no constraints upon the personal sovereignty that he believed was bequeathed to him from God. The legal reforms of the 1160s and 70s are now regarded as having been not so much constitutional as fiscal in intent, designed to bring new sources of income to the crown from fines and forfeitures and only incidentally impacting upon the balance of power between royal and baronial jurisdictions. Henry’s court was one in which chivalric or Christian codes of honour masked far crueller realities. As Thomas Becket was to learn to his cost, the King’s protection and favour could be removed just as easily as they were bestowed.

Henry himself is said to have taken pride in his ability to inspire fear. According to one contemporary, the King declared to his confessor that he saw no reason why kings should not be angry when, as he had read in the Old Testament, God almighty, the King of Kings, was frequently filled with wrath. Thwarted in his arbitrary exercise of power, Henry could be a very angry king indeed. Paradoxically, for all his marital infidelities and despite his notorious dealings with Becket, he was also a deeply religious man. This can be seen even more clearly now that we have a proper idea of his itinerary: the day-to-day movements of his court by which Henry crisscrossed the Channel and his various lands, imposing personal rule for want of any administrative machinery capable of operating from a fixed imperial capital. Like those of many much earlier kings, Henry’s itinerary appears to have been planned with close, and to modern eyes, superstitious attention to the festivals of the Church. Henry’s empire was a cross-Channel affair, yet sea crossings in the twelfth century were invariably dangerous ventures. Many of Henry’s courtiers were to be drowned in accidents encountered while sailing from one part of his empire to another. No wonder that the King consulted astrologers or that he timed his sailings in accordance with the dictates of religion. A story from Reading Abbey tells us that Henry was assiduous in sending for the abbey’s greatest relic, the hand of St James, to bless his voyages whenever he was about to embark overseas. In selecting December 8th, 1154, as the date for his crossing to England immediately before his coronation, Henry appears deliberately to have chosen to sail on the feast day of the Conception of the Virgin Mary, a festival that in the 1150s was regarded as both distinctively English and theologically controversial. In these, as in other respects, Henry’s reign seems not so much the harbinger of later constitutional developments as a throwback to the era of his own personal heroes, Arthur, Charlemagne and Edward the Confessor.

Modern research is slowly transforming our image of Henry II, seen now not only as a moderniser whose reign was pregnant with future consequences for the histories of England, Ireland and France, but in some respects as a deeply conservative ruler, self-consciously rebuilding an image of kingship inherited from the early medieval past. Standing at the high altar of Westminster Abbey in December 1154, Henry and those in attendance at his coronation, can have had little idea of quite what a phenomenon was about to be unleashed upon the world. Today, on the 850th anniversary of that event we may at last be in a position to appreciate the full significance of Henry II’s accession to power. Angevin kingship and the Plantagenet empire were Henry’s creations. Though they may have been doomed in the longer term to military defeat and to the baronial discontent and rebellion that under King John were to result in Magna Carta, their author, Henry Plantagenet, richly deserves our remembrance.

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