

Crusades: The Reputation of Richard I the Lionheart

Luke

Richard the Lionheart was a great warrior but a poor king.

Coeur de Lion, or Heart of a Lion, was the title given to Richard I, King of England. One of the three leaders of the Third Crusade, Richard was deemed one of the most brilliant and courageous men alive and his fame spread before him into the East. Despite the failure of the Crusade, and the English King's imprisonment afterwards, Richard maintained his status and title. Along with his aptitude in battle, Richard had many exemplary traits. Yet while he was abundant in the spirit of the body and heart, he lacked the true qualifications to run a kingdom. Revolts occurred during his reign due to his absence from England during the Crusade and his confinement. The Crusade and his ransom depleted the country of wealth that led to heavy inflation. While Richard Plantagenet was the ideal soldier and truly deserved the title of Lion-Heart, he was a disastrous ruler and failed to govern his kingdom efficiently.

Richard Plantagenet is more famous for his part in the Crusades than his reign of ten years in England. After being crowned King of England at the death of his father, Henry II, in 1189, Richard quickly departed for the Holy Land on what was to be the Third Crusade. Before his succession, Richard had already fought many battles. The first was against his father in alliance with his brothers and the King of France, Louis. This uprising failed, and as a result, Richard was stripped of his powers of Duke of the land of Aquitaine. (Broughton pp 15-17) Now under the full control of his father, Richard fought the rebellious barons of his old dukedom. This conflict lasted five years ending in the victory of Richard at the destruction of the supposedly impregnable fortress of Taillebourg. This castle was inaccessible on three sides due to mountains, and the fourth side heavily fortified. Richard knew that the overthrow of Taillebourg would lead to the immediate surrender of the barons, and brilliantly captured the stronghold in "...his first great military victory." (Broughton p 17)

According to Richard of Devizes, a monk at Winchester at the time of Richard's reign, his Crusade to the East caused the people of England to appreciate Richard I.

"The King was indeed worthy of the name of King, for in the very first year of his reign, for Christ's sake he left the realm of England almost as if he were going away and would not return. So great was this man's devotion and thus quickly, thus speedily and hastily he ran, or, rather, flew to avenge Christ's injuries." (Appleby p 5)

Hallam, however, claims that Richard's obsession with war inspired the Crusade. "...his *raison d'être* was the battlefield. He waged war ferociously, savagely and charismatically for most of his reign...His obsession took him to the Holy Land...". (Hallam 1986: p 195) Richard of Devizes saw Richard Plantagenet's departure to the East as a religious duty to Christ and to the English People. Hallam saw it as a justification for war. This love of fighting is mentioned in many sources. Stubbs tells that "The leading feature in Richard's character was the love of war...for the mere delight of the struggle and the charm of victory." (Stubbs 1864: p xix) Runciman says: "It was only the art of warfare that could hold his attention. As a soldier he had real

gifts, a sense of strategy and of tactics and the power to command men." (Runciman 1954, p 35) These comments show that Richard was more than a competent warrior. Richard of Devizes's chronicle outlines the King's heroic efforts in the East, and states: "The King...knew nothing better than storming cities and overthrowing castles...". (Appleby p 24)

Another of King Richard's traits was a love of wealth. To fund the Crusade, he sold off positions, counties, sheriffdoms, castles, and huge amounts of land. This raised a massive amount of money and promises for more. Stubbs claims that "...if they [the promises of money] had been fulfilled, he would have been richer by far than all the Kings that were before him." (Stubbs p 109) While the excuse for this was to raise money to fund the Crusade, Bingham says that Richard "...used England as a bank on which to draw and overdraw in order to finance his ambitious exploits abroad...". (Bingham p 99) The action of raising money seems to have caused Richard great joy, and at one stage he is said to have cried: "I would sell London, if I could find a purchaser." (Bingham p 99) This love of wealth, verging on the trait of greed, occurs numerous times in his life.

One of the things Richard had to deal with before his departure was his brother John. Richard regarded John as untrustworthy, but still held a great affection for him. Stubbs says that Richard's best trait was that of forgiveness. Before leaving, Richard made John Earl of Gloucester, Count of Mortain, and granted him the royal revenues of six English counties - Derby, Nottingham, Dorset, Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall. The King refused to declare John his heir, and ordered him into exile for three years, so not to make any trouble. (Stubbs pp 107-109)

On his way to Jerusalem, storms blew some of the King's ships onto the island of Cyprus. The ruler of the land was Isaac Ducas Comnenus, an independent ruler after a revolt against Byzantium. An unwise man, he arrested Richard's men and confiscated all of their goods. Runciman claims that this angered Richard, who then stormed the island and after reinforcements arrived, undertook the conquest of Cyprus which "...was an opportunity too good to be missed." (Runciman p 45) Richard of Devizes writes in his chronicle of the initial assault by Richard on Cyprus:

"...he ordered the whole army to arm first to last and to leave the big ships and follow him ashore in galleys and skiffs. What he ordered was quickly done, and he came armed up to the harbour. The King, in arms, leaped from the galley first and gave the first blow in the battle, but before he could give the second he had 3,000 of his men at his side striking with him." (Appleby pp 36-37)

Eventually Isaac surrendered and "...was captured and brought to the King. He begged for pardon, and it was granted; he offered homage to the King, and it was received." (Appleby p 37) In these actions, Richard shows valour, bravery and forgiveness. Richard of Devizes goes on to say that "...the English would have been defeated on that day if they had not been fighting under Richard." (Appleby p 38) The capture of Cyprus not only brought Richard increased fame, but a wealth of money and supplies. He kept the gold, silk and jewels for himself, and gave the army the silver, food and provisions. On top of this, Richard taxed every Greek on the island, and started to accept donations. Thus the fortunes of Richard increased. (Runciman p 46) Richard managed to sell Cyprus to the Templars for 100,000 gold dinars afterwards, and even

though only 40,000 dinars were ever actually paid, "...the direct cash return on his Cypriot investment was very handsome." (Brundage p 66)

While this incident appears to be an accident, Brundage has a different point of view. There were no relations between the King of England and Byzantium, and according to Burgess, Richard had an "...anti-Byzantine bias..." before he even started on the Crusade. (Brundage, p 64) He goes on to claim that Richard "probably" had plans to attack Byzantine lands, and that the capture of Cyprus prolonged "...the Holy war for nearly two centuries after the final fall of Acre." (Brundage 1991: p68) Either way, the affair was an accident, no matter what the intentions were, and is one of the victories of the failed Crusade.

Richard then pressed onto Acre. Richard of Devizes in his chronicle says: "The King of the French had arrived in Acre before Richard and was much thought of by the natives, but when Richard came the King of the French was extinguished and made nameless, even as the moon loses its light at sunrise." (Appleby p 42)

This rather poetic imagery finally exposes Richard of Devizes as a biased historian, who thought very highly of Richard Plantagenet. No doubt Richard's fame had spread before him, as many historians claim. Runciman says that Richard was good-looking, physically superb, energetic and his "...reputation had travelled East before him." (Runciman p 35) He tells that the King of France, Philip Augustus, was weak, self-indulgent, disloyal, unattractive, unlovable, "...but a good King." (Runciman pp 35-36) This is one of the most important aspects that needs to be mentioned. The people of medieval times appear to have, very much like today's society, seen the brave, victorious King better than the quiet, unappealing King, no matter the quality of their statecraft. Thus people "...were better able to appreciate Richard, with his courage, his knightly prowess and his charm; and...Richard seemed the nobler, the richer and the greater of the two." (Runciman p 36)

The rest of the crusade continued, with many victories for Richard who captured Acre, then defeated Saladin at Arsuf, rebuilt Jaffa, rebuilt Ascalon, captured Daron and recaptured Jaffa. Richard owned the entire coast, yet still failed to take the Holy City itself. During the whole time constant negotiations were at hand, yet each time failing to reach the objective. In each case the Kurdish offered something in return for the stronghold of Ascalon, the fortress Richard had rebuilt "...making it the strongest castle on all the coast of Palestine." (Runciman, p 62) Richard refused to give up the city.

In the final encounter at Jaffa, Richard, outnumbered, used skill and tactics to defeat the Moslem army of seven thousand with fifty four knights and two thousand infantry. With the horsemen controlled, he fired a volley of arrows at the enemy, then charged at the head of his spearmen. "Saladin was lost in angry admiration at the sight." (Runciman p 72) The true respect Saladin held for the King of England was shown when Richard was unhorsed, and Saladin sent him two fresh horses to continue fighting. Richard won the day, and caused his enemy to retreat to the safety of Jerusalem. The final treaties were soon passed, with the English King finally agreeing to give up Ascalon in return for full access to the holy Places by Christians. Richard had received word that trouble was brewing at home in England with his brother John, and the longer he stayed in the East the more chance he would lose his kingdom. This,

along with his failing health - Richard had fallen ill many times during the Crusade - led to the end of the Third Crusade. Richard had shown numerous accounts of bravery and courage. He made brilliant tactical decisions and outmanoeuvred the enemy at every chance. Yet despite this, Jerusalem was never captured, and the Crusade was a failure.

During his adventures in the far East, Richard managed to insult the Duke of Austria, leader of the German army. In Acre, the Duke believed he was of equal standing with the Kings of England and France, and he "...set his standard up beside Richard's, only to see it taken down by the English and hurled into the fosse below." (Runciman p 51) Whether this action was at the order of Richard, or merely a response from the English troops is unknown. Either way, the event was seared in the Duke's memory along with an immense hatred for the King of England. So when Richard travelled through the Duke's land on his return to England, he was captured and imprisoned. Several months later he was handed over to the emperor, Henry VI, who moved Richard around the country in various castles. The Coeur de Lion survived his year-long captivity, apparently composing songs and poetry. (Hallam p 228)

It was during this incarceration that the legend of the Lion-Heart was born. While being held by King Modred of Almain, Richard fell in love with his daughter, Margery, and she in turn with the King. After a week of sordid love affairs in the jail, they were caught together. Modred wanted Richard to be killed on the spot, but his advisers warned against killing such a mighty King, so they organised an 'accident' A lion kept by Modred was starved for several days, before it was allowed to 'escape' into Richard's cell. Margery learnt of the plan, and warned the English King. Richard, refusing to escape, asked for forty silk handkerchiefs, which he tied around to his right arm. When the lion sprang into his prison, Richard smashed his fist into the lion's chest. The lion roared with defiance, and the English King "...simply thrust his hand down the lion's throat and tore his heart out." (Gillingham p 7) Richard then strode out of the cell, unchallenged, his "...bleeding trophy..." (Broughton p 69) clasped in his fist, and up into the Great Hall where Modred and his ministers were feasting. He walked up to the men, squeezed the heart dry, threw it down on the banqueting table, dipped it in salt "...and proceeded to eat it with relish." (Gillingham p 8) This tale was, as Gillingham tells, invented to explain the title of Lion-Heart, and is not to be believed. Gillingham states that "Of the learned it is thought that this is but a fable, but rather that he was so called for his invincible courage and strength." (Gillingham p 8) The title of Lion-Heart has remained with Richard I of England throughout the centuries, always for his brave and courageous deeds. The myth of the real lion heart is little known, and is hardly a basis for any historical information. However, it does show that medieval people had a love of mystery, romance, and immortal acts.

The ransom for Richard's release again strained England of its wealth. The enormous amount was eventually paid along with an oath of vassalage to Henry VI. On the King's return, he found a land at war. A year had exposed England to John's usurping attempts, and unchecked attacks from King Philip of France, Richard's old Crusade partner. Richard at once began collecting funds to start a war with Philip.

"..for three days Richard acted as chief judge, financier, and politician; taxing his friends, condemning his enemies, and concocting plans for the security and quiet

administration of the realm. By selling sheriffdoms, exacting fines, and enacting taxes, he raised money to begin hostilities with Philip at once." (Stubbs, p124)

For the rest of his life, Richard fought against the King of France, showing the brilliance he had shown in the East. Richard had built in France the castle of Chateau Gaillard to protect Rouen and to act as a base. The cost was gigantic, but the result was stunning. Combining his knowledge of siegecraft with the strongholds of the East, Richard had built the most "remarkable" fortress of the period. (Hallam p 250) When Philip heard of the castle through stunned reports from his messengers, he replied it would not last. Richard, on hearing this comment cried: "By God's throat!...if yon castle were built of neither iron, nor stone, but wholly of butter, I would without hesitation undertake to hold it securely against him and all his forces." (Norgate 1924, p 82) This boast outlines Richard's character well, a belief that he was invincible.

Richard's greed and pride led to his death. After hearing that a peasant had unearthed a great treasure in Limousin and had taken it to his lord at the castle of Chalus-Charbrolm, Richard "...hurried south from Anjou, determined it should be his." (Gillingham p 9) On his arrival he besieged the castle with his army. The garrison soon realised defence was futile against "...the most famous destroyer of castles in Europe..." (Gillingham p 9) and organised a surrender. The Lion-Heart refused their offer, and swore to hang them all. Then, at dusk a few nights later, in a "brutal" and "over-confident" mood, he was struck in the shoulder by an arrow. At the time he was unarmed save for an iron head-piece, and the arrow penetrated his left side just below the neck. Richard continued the attack, and returned to his tent.

Historians disagree about the events that followed. Norgate believes that Richard "rashly" tried to remove the arrow himself, but only succeeded in making the wound worst, and breaking the arrow. Bingham tells that the wound was so severe, that not even the most skilled surgeon could have saved the King's life. Broughton believes that the surgeon cut the arrow out with little skill, allowing it to fester. Stubbs also blames the "awkwardness of the surgeons"

Within eleven days the great King of England was dead, "...the greatest crusader of his age, had been killed in a trivial quarrel...". (Gillingham p 9) Before his death, he announced John his heir, forgave his killer and set him free, held confession, bequeathed his jewels to his nephew King Otto and handed over a fourth part of his treasures to his servants and the poor. While some of these may have been acts of generosity, "Richard was facing not merely death but the judgment of God." (Bingham p 134) While Norgate and Stubbs see the act at face value - a deed of kindness - later historians appear to be more cynical. The thought that he freed his killer and gave his wealth to the poor to gain access to heaven is not very romantic nor the true act of a Lion-Heart, so it does not appeal to the early chroniclers. Richard Plantagenet, Coeur de Lion and Crusader had his heart enclosed in a gold and silver casket and placed among holy relics in the Rouen cathedral.

As a King, Richard failed miserably. The cost of the Crusade, his ransom, and his war with Philip depleted England of nearly all its funds built up by Henry II. This, with difficulty in adjusting revenues accordingly lead to heavy inflation. (Holmes p 160) The men he left in charge in his absence - he only spent six months in England out of a ten year reign - were quite often villains out to secure wealth, prestige, and lands for

themselves and their family. He neglected his kingdom; he had given no attention to relations with Ireland, Scotland or Wales, and indeed, had any real foreign policy at all. Yet still the people of England loved him. "Richard was a flawed hero, yet he possessed heroic qualities which appealed to successive generations of Englishmen." (Holmes p 9) As a man he was over six foot in height. Richard had a shock of red-yellow hair, high cheekbones, and a small firm mouth. His noble head was placed on a thick sturdy neck. The Lion-Heart was handsome, and had a charm that won men from any origin over to his side. He had a shapely frame, with well-proportioned limbs; "...no arm was better adapted than his for drawing [a] sword, nor more powerful to strike with it " (Norgate p 33) Richard Coeur de Lion was a born soldier, and he knew it. (Bingham pp 95,98)

Richard Plantagenet was a fighter first and a King second. His reign was entirely devoted to war, and he managed to ignite conflict between himself and his father, his brothers, the King of France, Saladin, Isaac Comnenus, the Duke of Austria, Emperor Henry VI, and numerous barons. The deeds of his life are huge, and despite the failure of the Third Crusade, Richard managed to grant access for Christian pilgrims to the Holy Places of the East. His overwhelming charm, military genius and pride allowed him to keep himself and his troops alive. Yet he was gravely flawed. His arrogance lead to his imprisonment, and his poor statecraft lead to revolts in England, a truly neglected Kingdom. Richard's title, Coeur de Lion, most probably derived from his bravery in battle, has inspired poets to create legends about him. Richard was a courageous and brilliant fighter, thus his title of Coeur de Lion is well deserved. The title Richard did not deserve was that of "King of England."

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