**King Richard and his reputation: An Overview**

**The Warrior king?**

Richard’s reputation is based primarily on his perceived invincibility in warfare.

Acting as Henry’s viceroy in Aquitaine from 1174 he suppressed frequent local uprisings.

His reign was defined by war:

* Third Crusade 1190-1193
* War against Philip II in Normandy and Berry 1194-1199
* Crushing continued rebellion in Aquitaine

Richard’s leadership of the Third Crusade was seen by contemporaries as the defining event of his life. By protecting the Church in Outremer the chroniclers, often churchmen held Richard in the highest regard. The liberation of Christian places from the Muslims was the highest goal of a chivalric lord. The **Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi** was written as a chronicle of Richard’s reign and describes Richard as, "The King, whose goodness always imitated higher things and who, as the difficulties were greater, now emulated God himself".

**Richard of Devizes**, a monk who lived during Richard’s reign, wrote that:

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.

**Roger of Howden** portrayed Richard as a hero like those in chivalric romance, a perfect knight, a model knight.

Other chroniclers like **Gerald of Wales and Peter of Blois**, tolerated behaviour from Richard, yet criticised Henry II and John for the same actions.

Modern historians such as **Gillingham and Prestwich** also see Richard’s reputation in war as evidence of the king’s greatness. They both claim:

* Strengthening Outremer ranked higher than simply recovering Jerusalem
* Richard showed broader strategic vision through the conquest of Cyprus which gave a source of supply and revenue off the Palestine Coast and remained the last surviving territory of Outremer.

**Gillingham’s argument** is that Richard should be judged as a warrior. Richard was an outstanding ruler who fulfilled his knightly responsibility as he defended not only his patrimony but Christ’s also.

**Prestwich argues** that Richard’s obsession with war was a necessary defence of his and Christ’s empire. The Crusade served the dynastic purpose of the House of Anjou by gaining favour with the Church. Moreover Richard displayed an impressive grasp of strategy on both land and sea and his valour was crucial to maintaining morale.

**BUT: Was Richard always considered so highly?**

Richard was criticised by contemporaries, the Pope and his own crusading army for not retaking Jerusalem. The Itinerarium, in addition to highly praising Richard, mentions incidents where his judgment was rash and his actions highly questionable. This is particularly noticeable in an account of how Richard was almost captured by Saladin’s men because he had chosen to travel alone instead of with a guard. The Itinerarium states that Richard’s soldiers: "...scolded him over his frequent recklessness and cautioned him against such behaviour"

Richard’s ability as a knight is questioned by **Markowski** in “Richard Lionheart: Bad King, Bad Crusader” (1997): Extract from the abstract:

This paper analyzes the impact of King Richard Lionheart of England during his tenure as leader of the Third Crusade. It examines crusade policy and the significance of Richard's decisions to deviate from it. The lack of control which both the Church and normative crusading precedents had over him becomes apparent. Richard's failure to take Jerusalem leads to the conclusion that his self-centred, puerile interests in personal adventures destroyed the chance for success of the Third Crusade, and thus prolonged warfare. Most wars have some sort of peace as the ultimate goal. The Third Crusade is no exception, but Richard subverted the goal of peace by turning away from a siege of Jerusalem and toward various other adventures, for example, attacks on Egyptian holdings, border skirmishes, the conquest of Cyprus from the Byzantines. Still, the Lionheart's legend persists from his day to our own to extol chivalrous virtues and courageous action. This paper presents the other side of the coin in the hope of approaching a more balanced, accurate portrayal of Richard's crusade leadership and of the ends of crusade ideology which he undermined.

**Lyon sees** Richard’s apparent victory over Philip in 1199 as dubious because:

* Richard never recovered the parts of Normandy lost in 1193
* By 1199, Philip had expanded the war on several fronts, raising doubts about Richard’s ability to defend his vast empire
* The brutal and barbarous struggle undermined the loyalty of Normandy which bore the brunt of the war
* There was no decisive victory, just a series of truces
* Contemporaries viewed the fall of Normandy in 1204 (under John) as the culmination of a long process resulting from Richard’s neglect of his subjects

**Summary: King Richard and His Reputation**

****

**TASK**: Using the Gillingham Article, complete the following exercise.

1. Use Gillingham to note the medieval and modern views of Richard
2. Use the following criteria defined by Gillingham to judge the success/failure of Richard
* Protect the Church
* Do justice
* Suppress evil laws and customs
* Command victory in war
* Provide peace and stability at home
* Strengthen government
* Provide for the succession to the Crown

**Decide: Was Richard a good King? Make sure you can justify your view.**

# The Art of Kingship: Richard I, 1189-99 By [John Gillingham](http://www.historytoday.com/author/john-gillingham), 31 March 1985

[History Today](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/43)[Volume: 35 Issue: 4](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/604)[1985](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/14759)

What made for a good king in the Middle Ages? This month John Gillingham argues the case for Richard I.

For anyone who wishes to understand the art of kingship the reign of Richard I (1189-99) makes an ideal starting-point. For one thing it is conveniently short and for another there can have been few kings who have been so lavishly praised by contemporary historians and so fiercely criticised by modern ones. English writers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were unanimous in looking upon him as a model king. They reported visions in which Richard was seen ascending into heaven - one of them a vision granted to St Edmund Rich, Archbishop of Canterbury (1233-40), while he was in a state of levitation. The St Albans chronicler Roger of Wendover described Richard not merely as 'the most victorious' - that a modern reader might expel - but also as 'pious, most merciful and most wise'. Even writers from a very different cultural background were equally convinced of Richard's outstanding qualities. In the view of Ibn-al-Athir, the most influential Muslim historian of the thirteenth century, Richard's courage, shrewdness, energy and patience made him the most remarkable ruler of his times’ - times, be it noted which included such rulers as Saladin and Philip Augustus. In other words if we wish to know how a king was to behave if he was to satisfy contemporary ideals of kingship then Richard the Lionheart is our man.

Yet in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries most historians learned to take a very different view. 'One of the worst kings ever to rule England' - even historians who disagree on almost everything else have managed to agree on this. In writing that ‘Richard was not a good king. He cared only for his soldiers', L. Du Garde Peach (author of Richard the Lionheart, Ladybird History Book, 1965), was faithfully reflecting received academic opinion. How are we to explain this striking discrepancy between medieval and modern?

In part it is because some modern historians have insisted on seeing Richard as though he were first and last a king of England, a king who was rarely 'at home', a king 'who neglected his kingdom'. (Although, since England was only one part of his dominions it by no means follows that when he was out of the kingdom he was shirking his responsibilities). But presumably it could also be the result of a change in our perception of kingship. It is possible that Richard’s fault has been that in successfully conforming to twelfth-century ideals of kingship he has inevitably fallen short of the standards required by men who lived seven hundred or more years later. Thus a study of Richard's reign should serve to illuminate both medieval and modern notions of kingship.

I begin at the beginning (roughly speaking) of a king's reign: his coronation. In his coronation oath Richard, like all his predecessors, made three basic promises: first, to protect the church; second, to do justice; third, to suppress evil laws and customs. It is precisely within the framework of this triple formula that Roger of Wendover perceived Richard's rule:

He did right to all and would not allow justice to be perverted. He filled vacant churches quickly, giving them freely to those who were elected according to the rules of canon law. He honoured church-men, especially monks.

But was Wendover right? Or did he distort Richard’s reign by seeing it as the ‘good old days’ before the dreadful years of King John?

As protector of the church, Richard stands out among kings of England as being the only one to pay more than lip service to the crusading ideal, the notion that as a Christian he had a responsibility not only to the provincial church within which he lived, but also to the Christian community as a whole and to the church in the Holy Land in particular. Few indeed were the twelfth-century churchmen who believed that by going on crusade a king was neglecting a greater responsibility. And whatever Richard's motives for taking the cross, the fact remains that as a crusader-king he earned a reputation - with the papacy for example - which could only assist him in the task of managing the church within his own dominions. It is no coincidence that in a period when church-state conflicts were common - as in the reigns of both his father, Henry II (1154-89), and his brother, John (1199-1216) - Richard's rule stands out as a decade of businesslike co-operation. This was very much to the King's advantage. It was in the interest of cathedral chapters to elect as bishops men who enjoyed the confidence of such a king, so the King got the sort of bishop he wanted.

A revealing story told by Adam of Eynsham, the biographer of St Hugh of Lincoln, tells how when Hugh went to visit the King in 1198, he found him hearing mass in the chapel of his new castle of the Rock of Andeli (Chateau-Gaillard). Richard was on a royal throne while at his feet stood the Bishops of Durham and Ely. Before becoming Bishop of Durham, Master Philip of Poitiers had been a clerk of the King's Chamber and his constant companion, both on crusade and during the perilous journey home. Master Eustace, the newly consecrated Bishop of Ely, had been Vice-chancellor and Keeper of the King's Seal since 1194. In an atmosphere of co-operation it was easy for clerks to be the king's good servants and look forward to receiving the benefices which were their due. The most famous of these King's Clerks was a man who ranks as the supreme embodiment of the civil servant-prelate: Hubert Walter. As Archbishop of Canterbury, papal legate and chief justifier he became head of both ecclesiastical and secular government in England. He was, in C.R. Cheney's carefully weighed words, 'as good a head as the English church could expect to have' and at the same time, in J.C. Holt's phrase, 'one of the greatest royal ministers of all time'.

But harmony between church and state did more than just make life easier and more rewarding for bureaucrats. Others too enjoyed the benefits. A study of the monastic patronage of the English and French royal houses in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries has shown that Richard was a more generous benefactor than either Henry II or Philip Augustus. The Cistercians in particular, had good cause to remember him with gratitude. And the story of St Hugh's visit to Richard reveals another side of the King's character. It shows us the King enthroned and accompanied by the royal choir in full voice. From other evidence we know that Richard enjoyed music. He was not only a patron of troubadours: he was a song-writer himself. Perhaps the words and music of the liturgy appealed to him on purely artistic grounds, but we should also remember that the ritual of the church was a ritual which exalted kings, an ecclesiastical drama in which the king, enthroned, played a central role.

As for 'doing justice' (the second promise) this was in one sense at least difficult to avoid. The king was regarded as 'the fount of justice' and in consequence was pestered by petitioners of all sorts. Litigants turned to him for help knowing that the king's judges would defer to the king and that 'difficult' - or politically sensitive - cases would normally be postponed until the king's views had been heard. All this, of course, was usual but it is important to note that, judicially speaking the only unusual thing about Richard's reign was the extraordinary lengths to which people were prepared to go in order to solicit Richard's aid. They pursued him on crusade; even while he was held prisoner in Germany (December 1192 to February 1194), they sought him out and asked him - and of course paid him - to smooth and hasten (or sometimes slow down) the course of justice. Under the pressure of demand, Richard's reign witnessed a continuing development of the judicial system in England - the only part of Richard's dominions when its history can be traced. The earliest extant records of pleas held in the royal court, theatrics regis, date from 1194. A study of the judges who sat at Westminster in John's reign has shown that fifteen (eleven of them laymen) sat so regularly that they can reasonably be called 'professional judges'. Of these fifteen, no less than eleven had been active in Richard's reign. None of this was necessarily due to the King's own initiative; nonetheless it would be a mistake to imagine that Richard's reign marked a break in the development of English law.

As for the third promise, much naturally depends on how one defines 'evil customs'. Richard's own definition would doubtless have been rather different from the remarkably long and detailed definition set down in Magna Carta sixteen years after his death; but he recognised that something was expected from him and, like many another ruler, he began his reign with a series of politic gestures. One of Henry II's most unpopular ministers was arrested and ostentatiously dragged around in chains. Those whom the old King had imprisoned without due process of law were released. The message was clear. As a contemporary put it, the golden age was on the way back. Of course once the new King was securely established then it might well be a very different story and all the evidence suggests that Richard intended to be a masterful king, more interested in manipulating the world to his advantage than in changing it. Nonetheless it is striking that John did not choose to begin his reign by critiquing his predecessor.

Some historians believe that Richard's coronation oath actually contained four not three promises. However this may be, it is clear that, implicitly or explicitly, there was a fourth obligation laid upon the King. The compiler of an early thirteenth-century version of the Laws of Edward the Confessor asserts that:

The king ought to prefix and defend all lands and honours, all dignities, rights and liberties of the crown in their entirety, without diminution, and he ought with all his power restore to their former state any rights of the realm which have been dispersed, destroyed or lost.

But how was this to be done? This is a question that contemporaries did not trouble to answer. They till us what obligations a king was supposed to meet, but not how he was supposed to meet them. But here, in the view of most modern historians, we reach the heart of the matter at last. They look for competence in three inter-related fields: war, politics and administration. The King's job was to command victory in war, to maintain peace and stability at home, and to strengthen the institutions of government.

In the field of war Richard's reputation is a high one, though even here his cautious skills as a general have been obscured by the romantic image of the knight in amour. On the other hand his political and administrative skills have frequently been called into question. In the view of a recent biographer he was 'a peerlessly efficient killing machine but a dead loss in the council chamber'. Those who regard Richard as an incompetent claim that he reduced England to a state of administrative confusion, political chaos and financial exhaustion. In fact there is no good evidence to support any of these charges though, in passing, it is worth noting that all of them are based on the assumption that any time spent on non-English affairs was a waste of time. But even if we concentrate exclusively on England then Richard's record was a good one. True he was rarely in the country. In the immortal words of Sellar and Yeatman, 'Whenever Richard returned to England he always set out again immediately for the Mediterranean and was therefore known as Richard Gare du Lyon'. But a vital part of the art of kingship was knowing how to delegate power and there are few kings who can match Richard's outstanding ability to pick and promote able ministers. This meant that during his absences the country's financial and judicial machinery continued to function much as before and Prince John's attempts to seize power were easily checked by the agents whom Richard dispatched to deal with precisely this contingency.

In English domestic politics the stability of the realm depended primarily upon the King's ability to manage the small but immensely powerful aristocratic establishment. The fact that the members of this establishment were the King's feudal tenants gave him a considerable amount of control over their inheritances and marriages. This in turn meant that his powers of patronage were immense. In recent years the royal patronage system has been a fashionable subject for study, and rightly so. It meant that the King had at his disposal not only offices, he had also heirs, heiresses and rich widows. When, for example, Richard gave William Marshal the hand of the heiress to the earldom of Pembroke, he, in effect, made William a millionaire overnight. A ruler who could do this was a ruler whom men flocked to serve.

Inevitably the king's court was the focal point of the whole political system, a turbulent, lively, factious place where men - and a few women - pushed and jostled each other in desperate attempts to catch the king's eye. Not surprisingly it was a twelfth-century literary convention to debate a courtier's life as sheer hell - but standing at the entrance to this hell there were hundreds who were only too keen to enter. In these circumstances patronage was one of the strongest cards in the king's hand. But it was not a hand which played itself. The problem was that time the king satisfied one man he inevitably dashed the hopes of several others. In these circumstances the trick, as Sir Richard Southern expressed it, 'was to reward those who matter and to ensure that those who were not rewarded continued not to matter'. But there were inevitably disappointed men - and disappointed men were potential rebels. If a disgruntled prince was ready to lead them then they might well try to acquire by force what they regarded as their fair share of royal patronage. Here we see the significance of John's revolt in 1193. A royal prince was eager to lead men into rebellion, but few men would follow him. They preferred to remain loyal to a distant and captive King. This fact alone speaks volumes for Richard's mastery of the system - and, since the King's exercise of routine patronage had been delegated, for his choice of ministers.

In foreign policy Richard's objectives were first the recovery of the patrimony of Christ and then the defence of his own patrimony, the Angevin Empire. Although he failed to recover Jerusalem, by regaining - despite the fact that, logistical terms Saladin held all the advantages - the vital coastal strip of Palestine and then negotiating the 1192 Treaty of Jaffa which prolonged the life of the crusader states for another century, he achieved an 'almost incredible success'. After his return from crusade and imprisonment, his overriding priority was the recovery of those lands and castles, particulars in eastern Normandy and the Loire Valley, which Philip Augustus had snatched while he was in prison. By the time of his unexpected death in May 1199 he had all but achieved this aim, and if he had lived longer there is every reason to believe that the momentum of the last four years would have been maintained. In all these enterprises Richard faced formidable opponents (Saladin and Philip) but he proved himself, in war and in diplomacy, more than a match for both of them.

For a king to immerse himself in the daily routine of administration would have been unnecessary and counter-productive. What mattered was that he should delegate authority to competent and trustworthy officials. It is noticeable how often Richard picked and promoted men whom he had got to know during the testing time of the crusade – men like Hubert Walter Crusa, Philip of Poitiers, Robert of Thornham and Geoffrey de la Celle. These men were made responsible for collecting the huge sums which Richard's wars and Richard's ransom required. In the opinion of the Coggeshall Chronicler:

No age can remember or history tell of any King, even one who ruled for a long time who demanded and took so much money from his kingdom as this king extorted and amassed within the five years after his return from captivity.

But efficient administration is not just a matter of collecting large sums without arousing too much opposition. It is also a matter of sending money so that the desired end is achieved. Waging war, for example is very much a matter of administration, of ensuring that men and supplies, in the right quantities, are in the right place at the right time. In this sense Richard was a very competent administrator indeed.

But what was it all for? 'To preserve and defend the rights of the crown'. But 'the crown' was an abstraction. In mere reality it did not exist. Is this what kings were fighting for? In part perhaps, but medieval rulers, like most men, also felt the force of another obligation: to provide for their family. Even though this obligation was not spelt out in coronation oaths it is clear that it was one which was deeply felt. What then are we to make of Richard's record as a family man? He and his wife, Berengaria of Navarre, had no children, but we do not know why. There is no contemporary evidence that he was a homosexual. Indeed the story that he was is a modern, post-second World War legend. He had an illegitimate son whom he provided for by marrying him to the heiress to the lordship of Cognac. There is some evidence to suggest that by 1198 Richard was planning to have his marriage annulled, but the fact remains that he died without an heir of his body and this meant that there was an element of uncertainty about the succession when Richard died. This was a real problem. Throughout the Middle Ages, as later, succession disputes were the most frequent cause of serious political unrest.

Nonetheless, Richard's position as head of the senior branch of the house of Anjou meant that there were plenty of other members of the family whose interests had to be looked after. There was his widowed sister Joan. On his way to the Holy Land he rescued her from confinement in Sicily; collected the dower which had been withheld from her; rescued her again when she was shipwrecked off Cyprus; infuriated her by proposing that she should marry Saladin's brother; finally, in 1196, as part of an important diplomatic settlement, he married her to Count Raymond VI of Toulouse. He also arranged marriages for his nieces, one to the heir of the county of Perche, another, Blanche, to Louis, the heir to the throne of France. His nephew Otto he provided for in various ways, eventually, in 1198, obtaining his election as Emperor Otto IV.

Then there was the junior branch of the house of Anjou. In 1189 this was represented by two young women, Sibylla Queen of Jerusalem, and her sister Isabella. Sibylla's husband was that Guy of Lusignan whom Saladin had defeated in the Battle of Hattin (1187) and it was to defend the rights of Sibylla and her husband that Richard embarked on his crusade. At Richard's court the kingdom of Jerusalem was looked upon as a family inheritance and it was along these lines that Richard negotiated with Saladin. The Third Crusade, in other words, was a piece of family business as well as an episode in a holy war against the infidel. After Sibylla's death Richard looked after Isabella, eventually finding a husband for her in the shape of another of his nephews, Count Henry of Champagne, and placing him on the throne of Jerusalem before he sailed for home. As for Guy of Lusignan, he compensated him by making him King of Cyprus (which he had conveniently conquered while on his way to the Holy Land). No other king of England was a king-maker on Richard's scale; the chief beneficiaries of his policy were the members of his own family.

One last point. It was the ruler's task to project an image of himself as king, to employ 'media men' to ensure that his deeds and policies were well publicized, and to contribute himself, through his own words and actions, to this vital task. Vital because the king could not be everywhere in person, but his image, in men's minds, could be. Like another great king, Alfred the Great, Richard was well aware of this aspect of the art of kingship. An Anglo-Norman minstrel, Ambroise, the eye-witness historian of the Third Crusade, told the story of the war against Saladin in a way which emphasized Richard's personal leadership and prowess. He compares Richard to the heroes of antiquity:

He had the valour of Hector, the magnanimity of Achilles; in courage he was the equal of Alexander and Roland. The liberality of a Titus was his and (what is rarely found in a soldier) he was gifted with the eloquence of Nestor and the prudence of Ulysses.

Ambroise tells how, when Richard captured the Emperor of Cyprus, the Emperor begged that he should not be put in irons. Richard agreed and promptly fettered him in silver chains. It was a tale calculated to be awe-inspiring, to make its audience aware of Richard's cunning and his prodigious wealth. And this image of Richard came to be widely circulated and generally accepted - not only by English authors but also by men who wrote for his caption and Muslim enemies.

Why did this view - Ambroise's view- of Richard come to be so widely accepted? Partly because it was a reasonably accurate one. Richard was shrewd, energetic and knew when to be patient. He was also courageous. He led from the front. This was not simply mindless courage. It was linked with a sense of honour, an unwillingness to expect his soldiers to run risks which he himself would not; linked also with an awareness of the practical advantages to be gained. It meant that the morale of his troops remained consistently high and it intimidated his enemies. Whenever Philip Augustus knew that the Lionheart - a contemporary name - was nearby, he took to his heels; and the rest of his army followed. But it was not only Richard's actions which were intended to produce these effects. So too were his words. The troubadour-king preached what he baptised. In his letters - letters intended to be circulated - he blew his own trumpet unashamedly, deliberately. After one pursuit of a fleeing Philip Augustus, Richard writes 'we ourselves unhorsed three knights with a single lance'. Roland himself could not have done better. Hardly surprising that Richard became a figure of legend when we consider how he self-consciously associated himself with the world of legend. When he rode out from Vezelay at the start of his crusade, the sword he carried at his side was none other than Excalibur. Yet he was also capable of weighing an intangible asset like a magical sword against more concrete goods. While in Sicily he did a deal with King Tancred; he swapped Excalibur for four large transport ships and fifteen galleys, a useful addition to the fleet which a king who knew the value of sea-power was taking to the Eastern Mediterranean.

It is beyond doubt that Richard lived up to contemporary ideals of kingship. Modern historians have often judged him differently, but even by modern criteria the management of patronage, administrative competence, ability to project an image and the like - he was a master of the art of kingship. Indeed in the sheer range and scale of his policies, from the Scottish order to Germany and the Pyrenees to Palestine, he surpassed all other kings of England. In his reign we can see kingship operating at full power.

**Further Reading:**

John Gillingham, Richard the Lionheart (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1978). Good studies of Richard I's predecessors include; WL Warren - Henry II (Eyre Methuen, 1973); RHC Davis - King Stephen (Longman, 1967). Christopher Brooke, The Saxon and Norman Kitty (Batsford, 1963); Frank Barlow, William Rufus ; (Eyre Methuen, 1983). J.E.A. Jolliffe, Angevin Kingship (A&C Black, 1963) is an analysis based almost exclusively on the governmental records. On the place of England within the wider context of the Plantagenet family lands see John Gillingham, The Angevin Empire (Edward Arnold, 1984). On Richard's generalship, John Gillingham, 'Richard I and the science power in the Middle pages in John Gillingham and JC Holt (Editors), War and Government in the Middle Ages (Boydell Press, 1984). On Richard's great minister there is a judicious biography, C.R. Cheney, Hubert Walter (Nelson, 1967).

**John Gillingham is a senior lecturer at the London School of Economics**