CRUEL, ANTI-ENGLISH AND ALMOST CERTAINLY GAY: MEET THE REAL RICHARD THE LIONHEART

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On the anniversary of King Richard I’s death, our history blogger shatters some myths about “the Lionheart” and compares him vividly to his famous adversary, Saladin …

As the young Pierre Basile gazed down from the windy battlements of Châlus-Chabrol castle, he could barely believe his eyes. It was the 25th of March 1199, and there, within crossbow range, was the infamous warlord who had killed his father and two brothers. And he was not even wearing his chainmail. Pierre did what any self-respecting twelfth-century boy from the Limousin would have done. He took the shot, and hit one of the most famous warriors of all time. When the festering shoulder wound began to turn gangrenous, the 42-year-old soldier pardoned young Pierre, and gave him a bag of money. Then, on the 6th of April 1199, a full 11 days after having been shot, the celebrated duke of Aquitaine and Normandy, count of Anjou and king of England, died of the wound.

Eight hundred and fifteen years later, Richard the Lionheart remains a shining national hero, with a unique place in popular culture — a name every schoolchild repeats with conviction when asked for a great medieval English king. Richard inspires a misty reverence, and somehow, like Arthur, personifies a certain historic Englishness. An indomitable equestrian bronze statue of him even prances outside the Palace of Westminster, patrolling with a drawn sword — daring anyone to challenge the good government of this country. His implicit embodiment of justice is so ingrained into our collective conscience that folk-heroes such as Robin Hood demonstrate their moral credentials by unswerving loyalty to him. And, since the 1930s, Hollywood has been unable to resist the temptation to insert a cameo appearance from an armoured and mounted Richard whenever a semi-divine presence is required.

In all this, Richard is perhaps best known for a lethal rivalry, in both life and death, that has become a metaphor for the age. His struggle was with a man who lies over 2,000 miles east of Westminster, in Damascus. Although the oriental warrior is buried in a simple wooden sarcophagus, an elegant marble one beside it tells an equally powerful story. It was presented in 1898 by Kaiser Wilhelm II as a mark of respect, from one great ruler to another — from the emperor of Germany and king of Prussia to Yusuf ibn Ayyub, better known as Saladin.

Despite history’s obsession with Richard as an ardent cross-toting crusader, he actually only fought for just over a year in the Holy Land, compared to 25 years of ceaseless warmongering in Europe. Nevertheless, popular sentiment has elevated his year of crusade into an epic and defining point of the high middle ages — a distillation of the seething currents coursing through the age of chivalry.

Richard and Saladin’s respective qualities have been an endless source of fascination over the centuries, and the pendulum has swung many times. Both men have been variously hailed as the truest incarnations of chivalry, or denounced as bloodthirsty butchers. In Richard’s case, for all the adulation he has traditionally received from the English, historians in the last two centuries have been less kind. For instance, Bishop William Stubbs (1825–1901) was Regius Professor of History at Oxford. He towered head and shoulders above all other British historians of his age. Yet, his assessment of Richard would not have pleased those Victorians who erected the triumphant equestrian statue in Westminster’s Old Palace Yard. Stubbs judged that Richard was: A bad son, a bad husband, a selfish ruler, and a vicious man. Perhaps most shocking, he went on to conclude: He was no Englishman. Stubbs was, in fact, not alone, or even of his time. Most historians, then and since, have not found much need to revise his unfavourable opinion.

We can start with the notion Richard was no Englishman. Although there is an implied criticism of his moral compass, the main point is that Richard despised England. It sounds blasphemous, but for all our centuries-old affection for him, the simple truth is that Richard could not abide this country. As an adult, he visited England only twice, and on each occasion for as short a period as humanly possible. The first was in 1189, when he came for four months to be crowned (an event he could hardly avoid) and also to oversee a fire sale of everything that was not nailed down. He famously remarked that he would have sold London if he could have found a buyer. Once back in France with his shiny English crown, he took no ongoing interest whatsoever in the running of his new kingdom. He was an absentee landlord, only concerned with the rents England yielded to fund his personal wars of dynastic consolidation and self-aggrandizement.

His second visit was in 1194, after he had finished crusading, and England had helped raise the eye-watering 100,000 marks ransom for his release from imperial captivity. When two months of dutiful plodding around England were up, Richard promptly took the first boat he could find back to the battlefields of France. England was, he said, cold and always raining, and it plainly held nothing for him — which is hardly surprising, as he was a thoroughbred Frenchman.

His mother, Aliénor (Eleanor) of Aquitaine, was one of medieval Europe’s most powerful, memorable, and extraordinary figures. Yet although queen-consort of England, she was most definitely southern French. His father, King Henry II of England, was likewise from across the water. He had Norman-Angevin blood, and controlled vast swathes of L’Hexagone, from the Channel to the Pyrenees. For Richard, who was never destined to ascend the English throne, everything north of the White Cliffs was secondary. His heritage and inheritance were in France, and this was perfectly reflected in the fact his two languages were Occitan and French (langue d’oc and langue d’oïl). There is no evidence he ever showed any interest in English. In all likelihood, he would have had no idea what the reverential epithet “Lionheart” meant. Even in death, after he had held England’s crown for ten years, his kingdom was not important enough to warrant any of his remains. The royal abbey of Fontevraud got his body, Châlus kept his intestines, and his heart (embalmed with frankincense, myrtle, mint, poplar, bellflower, and lime, according to recent chemical analysis) was dispatched to Rouen.

The simple reality is that Richard was duke, count, or lord of a breathtaking array of fiefs all over France. But what he (and his poisonous brothers) all really wanted was a crown — a VIP pass into a far more exclusive club. England eventually offered Richard that opportunity, and he took it, along with the country’s wealth. It was a means to an end, and that was the extent of his interest. So was Bishop Stubbs right to say he was no Englishman? Many would find it difficult to disagree.

The statement he was a “bad son” is also hard to deny. Richard was his mother’s favourite, and he was dutiful to her. But he did not show anything like the same loyalty to his father, Henry II.

Henry took the job of nursing a war-torn and fractured England back to health very seriously. Twenty years before his accession, Stephen of Blois had usurped the throne and unleashed a vicious civil war that left England burning for two decades. The Victorians called it the Anarchy, while the medieval Peterborough Chronicle famously said it was a time when “Christ slep, and his halechen” (Christ and his saints slept). Henry II healed the country’s wounds with dedication and skill. Yet Richard and his brothers Henry, Geoffrey, and John undermined and distracted him by spending years of their adult lives allying with Henry’s enemies and sending armies against him (at times with orders to kill him) in order to seize their inheritances early.

All their ingratitude, plotting, and treachery eventually wearied Henry into an early grave. Gerald of Wales notes that Henry’s deathbed lament was that of all his children, it was the legitimate ones who were the real bastards. So despite being good to his mother, Richard’s relationship with his father left a lot to be desired.

His record as a husband was likewise not spectacular. And here we tread on controversial territory, so let’s let the chronicles do the talking. This is how Roger of Howden (a close confidant of Henry II and Richard) describes Richard’s friendship with King Philip Augustus of France in 1187:

*Every day they ate from one table and one bowl, and by night the bed did not separate them. The king of France loved him as his own soul, and they loved each other so much that the king of England (i.e., Henry II, Richard’s father) was absolutely astonished at the passionate love between them.*

A minority of historians believe this passage records no more than a ritual symbolic show of political harmony between the two great royal lords. The majority of historians have never heard of the princely “bed-and-bowl rite”, and assumes Roger meant exactly what he wrote.

In any case, four years later, a political union was struck between Richard and Berengaria of Navarre, and the couple married in Cyprus en route to the Crusades. However, for whatever reason, Berengaria did not hang around for more than a few months, and soon headed back to France. But that is not the end of it. In 1195, Roger of Howden tells us that a hermit cautioned Richard to desist from certain same-sex acts, which he identifies clearly, and I do not need to. Despite the warning, Roger says Richard did not heed the words until a serious illness caused him to take his wife back again, although the marriage remained distant and childless to the end. So, no one would give Richard the award for husband of the year, either. (As a side note, Berengaria is England’s only queen never to have visited England while reigning.)

All that said, Richard did impress people with a range of virtues that were widely and deeply admired. In a violent age, his battle skills, both as combatant and strategist, were truly exceptional. As, on occasion, was his devotion to his men. Like when he went after a foraging party that had stumbled into serious trouble. “I sent those men there,” he said. “If they die without me, may I never again be called a king”. He was also a skilled orator. When prisoner of the Holy Roman Emperor, he awed everyone with his eloquent defence against the charge of having paid the Ismaili Assassins in the Holy Land to murder his rival, Conrad of Montferrat. (He was, in all likelihood, guilty of the charge.) He knew some Latin, and Muslim sources say he had a keen interest in Arabic culture. He was not a musician, but he loved music and wrote songs and poetry in Occitan and French. An Islamic chronicler summed him up as a man of wisdom, experience, courage, and energy.

The difficulty is that these attributes are permanently besmirched by accounts of his increasing cruelty. The most famous example occurred near Acre in the Holy Land. Richard and Saladin had been negotiating for months. Richard was to give Saladin back several thousand prisoners. In return Saladin was to pay a ransom and yield up the True Cross, which he had captured in 1187 at the Horns of Hattin. When Saladin stalled the discussions one time too many, Richard flew into a rage. He had 3,000 captured Muslim prisoners (including large numbers of women and children) taken to the nearby hill of Ayyadieh. There, in full view of Saladin and his army, they were beheaded and disemboweled. Even in an age of atrocities, this was an act of exceptional and shocking barbarity.So Richard was, undoubtedly, a different and more complicated character than the chivalrous and noble “Lionheart” of legend.

Saladin's Conquests

Leaving Richard for a moment, Saladin’s story is equally as fascinating. And surprising.

Joseph son of Job (Yusuf ibn Ayyub) was a Kurd from Tikrit, in northern Iraq. His family served Zengi of Aleppo and Mosul and his son, Nur ad-Din, whom they followed south. After a range of intrigues, Saladin found himself, aged 32, in charge of Egypt. Little by little, he expanded his influence, until by 1187 he held a vast swathe of the Neat East.

With the land surrounding the Crusader States now unified for the first time, Saladin set about expelling the Crusaders. Despite some stunning victories, he ultimately failed to oust the European settlers, and died a pauper in 1193, the year after Richard left the Holy Land.

Across the Middle East, Saladin is today a cultural hero. Not only for his popular jihad, but also for his chivalry, honour, decency, and generosity.

Bizarrely, a good deal of his modern reputation in the Muslim world is down to the Western memory of him. He was, it seems, largely forgotten in the East, eclipsed by Baybars, who finally and definitively expelled the Crusaders in 1291. But Crusader chroniclers and European writers strongly admired Saladin’s qualities, and they kept his story alive. For instance, the twelfth-century crusading archbishop, William of Tyre, wrote that Saladin had: *a keen and vigorous mind, valiant in war and generous beyond measure.*

The thirteenth century bestseller, the Ordene de Chevalerie, made him a popular hero throughout Europe. Dante honoured him by putting him in Limbo, along with the noble heroes of Greece and Rome. Boccaccio flattered him in the Decameron. And finally, as part of the Victorian romanticisation of the East, Sir Walter Scott depicted him in The Talisman (1825) as the perfect incarnation of knightly values. Given all this adulation, it was no wonder that Kaiser Wilhelm II made a special pilgrimage to his tomb.

Saladin’s chivalry is not really in doubt. Two well-known examples speak powerfully. The first was at the battle of Jaffa, when Richard the Lionheart’s horse fell under him. Saladin immediately sent a groom through the dust of battle to present Richard with a pair of fresh horses, along with the splendid message that a king as great as Richard should not fight on foot.

Months later, when Saladin heard that Richard was ill, burning up with a fever, Saladin sent him a gift of peaches and sherbet cooled with the snow from Mount Hermon. (Maybe he just wanted his spies to reconnoiter Richard’s camp, but either way it shows charm and grace.)

Both of these incidents occurred after the massacre at Ayyadieh, which tells us something about how quickly such brutality was forgotten.

The event that is often seen as the high point of Saladin’s chivalry was his capture of Jerusalem in 1187. But, in fact, here is where the picture starts to crack. Everyone knows how the Crusaders turned Jerusalem into a charnel house when they first took the city in 1099. By contrast, Saladin’s fans stress his clemency when he recaptured the city 88 years later.

However, it is more complicated. The standard practice for Christians and Muslims was that inhabitants of cities or castles which surrendered were spared, but those that put up opposition were slaughtered. (The cost of keeping them fed, apart from anything else, was often prohibitive.)

It was therefore always Saladin’s plan to execute the captured inhabitants of Jerusalem. However, he eventually decided on using them to raise money instead. The scheme he devised was that inhabitants should buy their safe passage out: ten dinars per man, five per woman, and two per child. Needless to say, not everyone could pay. Sixteen thousand, to be exact. Although Saladin did not kill them, he did not free them, either. According to his close confidant Imad ad-Din, the women and girls were all taken forcibly by his soldiers for their carnal pleasure, and then, together with the men and children, enslaved.

This is where we get closer to understanding these two men, because neither of their popular reputations gives the full medieval picture. For instance, although the Crusaders are widely labelled as religious fanatics (which many undoubtedly were), Muslim chroniclers freely record that Saladin also beheaded Christians who refused to convert to Islam. And in terms of general mayhem, we know European knights regularly razed the countryside (Richard certainly did, in France and Cyprus), and it should come as no surprise that Saladin did, too. A Muslim chronicler tells us of an occasion when Saladin was unopposed by Crusaders, and was free to besiege and pillage, burn and ravage the whole region, which he did.

Both sides committed atrocities. Saladin executed hundreds of Crusaders after the battle of Hattin. And after Richard murdered the 3,000 prisoners at Ayyadieh. Saladin retaliated by slaughtering all the Christian men, women, and children he held. When all is said and done, history has paired Richard and Saladin together because, even allowing for their vastly different cultures, there were strong similarities in personality and outlook. Despite Saladin’s seniority by 20 years, they were warriors of an age. For instance, both understood the nature of acquiring and protecting power, and neither was a stranger to political assassinations. We have already seen that Richard was implicated in the murder of Conrad of Montferrat. There was a similar incident in Saladin’s past, too. When he started his ascent to power in Fatimid Egypt, he executed Shawar, his only real competition to Nur ad-Din’s lands.

That said, Saladin was more refined than Richard. He came from a culture in which manners, decorum, humility, and respect were essential attributes of a civilised person — long before European knights developed any meaningful semblance of chivalric values. On the other hand, Richard was probably the better military strategist. The score sheet for their battles in the Third Crusade was three out of three to Richard. However, Richard failed to fight Saladin for Jerusalem — the whole purpose of his Crusade — and he returned to Europe ostensibly a failure, pulled away from his prize by the more pressing need to defend his interests from intriguers back home.

Chivalry is, ultimately, in the eye of the beholder. Both Western and Eastern commentators hyped up Saladin and Richard’s courtoisie, but neither of them was particularly enlightened by modern standards. Richard was even fond of the idea that he was a monster. The chronicler Gerald of Wales records that Richard liked to say he was descended from Melusine (a diabolical European fairy), and that his whole family “came from the Devil, and would return to the Devil”.

Despite the burnished legends on both sides, the story had no happy endings. Richard failed at his Crusade, and then failed to secure his legacy in France. Arguably, he also failed as king of England. Over in the Near East, Saladin failed to dislodge the Crusaders, and on a personal level his Ayyubid dynasty soon fractured. Even poor Pierre Basile, despite receiving forgiveness from Richard for having shot him with a crossbow bolt, was soon captured by Mercadier, Richard’s longstanding right hand man, who skinned him alive and hanged him.

The truth is that whatever the legends say of Richard, Saladin, and the late 1100s, fully-fledged medieval chivalry was still many years away.

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