

History of the Crusades.
Episode 25.
Eleanor of Aquitaine.

Hello again. The last three episodes have been dedicated to specialist topics, and today we will look at the final specialist topic before we start on the Second Crusade, Eleanor of Aquitaine.

Eleanor was born in 1122 into a wealthy family and became heiress to one of the richest domains in medieval Europe. Her family lands covered much of what is now southwestern France, extending across the County of Poitou and the Duchies of Aquitaine and Gascony. From the mountainous regions near the Pyrenees and the busy port of Bordeaux, across fertile plains containing vineyards, small walled cities, castles, monasteries and farms, the lands were productive and prosperous. Eleanor's father was Duke William X and her mother was Duchess Aenor. When Eleanor was born, they decided to name her after her mother, but perhaps they thought it was too confusing to have two Aenor's in the household so they came up with a unique solution. They decided to name their daughter "Another Aenor", which in their language, Languedoc, was "Eli Aenor", which eventually evolved into "Eleanor". Eleanor had a privileged childhood, marred only by the death of her mother and brother when she was eight years old, leaving only Eleanor and her younger sister Petronilla as heirs to the family fortune.

The court in which she spent her childhood was unusually sophisticated for its time. Musicians, troubadours and poets flourished under its patronage. Eleanor was given lessons in Latin and even learned how to read, which was an unusual skill for a girl to possess in medieval times. She developed a taste for luxury, delighting in fine clothes, and grew up to be an unusually beautiful young woman, probably with reddish brown hair. Personality wise, she was intelligent, headstrong, energetic, vivacious, and reckless, which was to prove an interesting combination.

We will start an examination of Eleanor's life in the year 1137. Why 1137, you ask? Well, to say that 1137 was a big year for Eleanor is an understatement. Eleanor had just turned 15 at the beginning of 1137, and it started like any other year, touring with her father around the family lands, attending lessons, riding with her sister and participating in the occasional hunt, flirting with the troubadours. But by the end of the year, Eleanor would be Queen of France. How did that happen? Well, we'll find out shortly, but first we'll take a look at what was happening around the rest of Europe and the Middle East in the year 1137 to put things into context.

Over in the Holy Land, the Kingdom of Jerusalem was being ruled by King Fulk and Queen Melisende. The crisis in their marriage and reign caused by Melisende's relationship with Hugh, Lord of Jaffa, happened five years ago, and they are working through their domestic and administrative challenges. To the north of Jerusalem, in Tripoli, Pons, who you may remember, was the son of Raymond of Toulouse's illegitimate son Bertrand, had ruled Tripoli competently, if not slightly recklessly, for 25 years, before being killed in battle a year ago, in 1136. His son, the 22 year old Raymond II, who had recently married one of Melisende's sister, Hodierna, was now rolling Tripoli and learning the ropes. Over to the east, Edessa was being ruled by the unattractive and not very popular Joscelin II. And in Antioch, Raymond of Poitiers had recently become Prince of Antioch by marrying the nine-year-old Princess Constance, putting an end to the ambitions of Melisende's sister

Alice, who had been scheming to rule Antioch in her own right. Raymond of Poitiers, the new Prince of Antioch, is in fact Eleanor's uncle, being her father's younger brother.

Right, let's see what's happening in England in 1137. England is two years into the disastrous reign of King Stephen. Now we are going to backtrack a little here because we need to learn a bit more about King Stephen before we get back to Eleanor. Firstly, I bet you'll never guess who King Stephen's father is. Okay. Here's a clue. He's one of the leaders of the First Crusade. Any ideas? His name "Stephen" might give it away? No. Well, if I said that King Stephen was sometimes known as King Stephen of Blois, that should give you a clue. Yes, King Stephen is the son of none other than the so-called coward of Antioch, Count Stephen of Blois and his wife Adela. How on earth did their son end up being the King of England?

Well, it's quite a story. It all started back in 1120 with the wreck of a ship called the White Ship. King Henry I, son of William the Conqueror, was ruling England at the time, and unfortunately for Henry, and for his kingdom, his legitimate son and heir was on board the ship, and he drowned when the ship went down. That left Henry with only one surviving legitimate heir, his daughter Matilda. Now Matilda was an intelligent, sensible, competent sort of person, and King Henry was determined that she should succeed him to the throne. This was rather a radical move, as England had never been ruled by a woman. He made his nobles swear oaths of loyalty towards her and married her off to the handsome and dashing and powerful French lord Geoffrey of Anjou.

But not everyone in England was convinced. Not everyone thought that being ruled by a woman was a great idea, and there were rumblings of discontent. This is where young Stephen of Blois comes in. Possibly encouraged by his ambitious mother Adela, Stephen, who after all was Matilda's cousin and grandson of William the Conqueror, began intriguing and quietly trying to garner support. When Henry died in 1135, Stephen rushed to London and had himself crowned King before Matilda had a chance to react. She countered by invading England with an army, intending to fight Stephen for the crown, resulting in a bitter civil war, which lasted for most of Stephen's reign and became known as the Anarchy.

No one likes a civil war. Apart from those killed in the battles which were fought, the land was laid waste, commerce and trade suffered, and many thousands of people died of starvation. Things were so bad during the first nineteen years of Stephen's reign that it was described as a period during which Christ and his angels slept. In 1137, King Stephen was two years into his tumultuous reign. Now, before we leave England, just keep in mind King Henry's daughter, Matilda, and her husband, Geoffrey of Anjou. They will play central roles in the life of Eleanor of Aquitaine.

Now, importantly, we come to France. What was happening in the Kingdom of France in 1137? Well, it was being ruled by Louis VI, also known as Louis the Fat because he was so overweight that he could no longer ride a horse. He wasn't a particularly healthy man, partly due to his weight and partly due to the fact that when he was young his stepmother had tried to kill him by poisoning him. She didn't succeed, but his sickly looks, blurred vision and occasional attacks of palsy were all attributed to the early poisoning incident. But despite his health problems, King Louis was an astute ruler and was doing a pretty good job of ruling the Kingdom of France, which at this time was no easy task.

The trouble was, the actual Kingdom of France was tiny. It consisted only of Paris and its surrounds. King Louis ruled the remainder of what now roughly equates to modern day

France by means of fealty. The powerful dukes and counts who controlled vast areas of France were all his vassals. Trouble was, some of them didn't want to be, and King Louis spent most of his reign trying to curb the ambitions of these men, who, after all, ruled domains much larger than his own.

As if Louis didn't have enough on his plate, in 1131 he faced a crisis of a different kind. In what seemed to be a growing trend in Europe at the time, Louis' fifteen-year-old son Philip was killed when a pig ran between his horse's legs, tripping the horse and unseating Philip, who died later of head injuries. Philip had been reared and educated to take over his father's reign, and his loss must have been a shock for Louis. Louis did have another son, the pious, younger Louis, who had been brought up in a monastery.

The younger Louis was a strange child, bookish, slightly nerdy, and rather emotional. Even in his later teenage years, he was prone to burst into tears if things didn't go his way, or overreact with an outburst of temper. He was ideally suited to the discipline and predictability of monastic life, where it seems he thrived. Naive and lacking in confidence, he was not suited to rule a kingdom. But in 1131, after the unexpected death of his older brother, the ten-year-old younger Louis was dragged out of his monastery, and work began on trying to get him into shape to become the future king. It's not clear who was more appalled at this turn of events, the older Louis or the younger one.

Anyway, by 1137 the younger Louis was sixteen years of age, and King Louis had come up with a cunning plan. He began negotiations for the younger Louis to marry the beautiful heiress Eleanor of Aquitaine. The areas of Poitiers, Aquitaine and Gascony were under the control of the Duke of Aquitaine and would eventually pass to Eleanor. Keeping these regions, and their volatile Duke, under control had been one of the challenges of Louis' reign, and he was determined to make life easier for his son by bringing them to heel by a marriage. The Duke of Aquitaine wasn't against the proposal, and so negotiations continued.

Now, at the beginning of 1137, things weren't going so well for Duke William, Eleanor's father. Medieval Europe was a highly militarized, lawless place, and Duke William and his court were constantly on the move, staying in castles, palaces and hunting lodges throughout his domain, meting out justice and curbing the behavior and ambitions of the local nobility. Well, that was the theory. In reality, Duke William was prone to outbursts of temper, and he tended to clash wildly with both his vassals and the Church. By early 1137 things were starting to spiral out of control, and he was considering taking up arms against some of his own people. Desperately needing both some time out and some divine intervention, Duke William made an unexpected decision. He decided to leave France and make a pilgrimage to Santiago to Compostela in northwest Spain, aiming to get there around Easter time. The old pilgrim route passed through his territory, and William traveled along it with his daughters as far as Bordeaux. He then continued his pilgrimage without his family, dressed simply and attended by a small group of knights and servants.

The good news was that William made it to Compostela by Good Friday. The bad news was, by the time he reached the shrine of St James, he knew he was dying. He was only 38 years old, but he had consumed some contaminated water in Spain, and had sickened so badly that he knew his last days were upon him. Hastily, he made out a will. He bequeathed all his lands to Eleanor and appointed King Louis as her guardian. He expressed his wish that Eleanor and the young Louis be married without delay, but to prevent Eleanor's inheritance being swallowed up by the crown, he stipulated that her

lands were to remain separate from royal territory, and should be inherited by Eleanor's offspring. Duke William was carried into the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela and died there. His body was laid to rest near the high altar next to the shrine of St James. The fifteen year old Eleanor was now Duchess of Aquitaine.

King Louis was informed of Duke William's death, and he hastily arranged for the younger Louis to travel to southern France to meet Eleanor and to marry her. The marriage took place in Bordeaux on the 25th of July, 1137. It was a sumptuous and extravagant affair, attended by almost 1,000 guests. Eleanor wore a scarlet gown. After days of celebrations, Eleanor gathered her attendants, and her sister, Petronilla, and departed with her new husband for Paris. During their journey, they were approached by a messenger bearing some startling news. King Louis had died of dysentery on the first of August. The sixteen year old Louis and his fifteen year old wife were now the King and Queen of France.

The young King and Queen made their way to Paris, where they settled into their new roles. For Louis, this entailed leaving much of the decision-making in the hands of his father's advisers, who were, after all, experienced in matters of administration. His time freed up, Louis spent his days dressed simply, more like a monk than a King, studying, assisting with church services, and praying. He spent every Friday fasting with the monks, consuming only bread and water.

Eleanor had a rather different approach to her role as queen. She had been raised in the vibrant and sumptuous courts of her father's domain, and the court of Paris was rather austere in comparison. To start with, the palace was ancient and in need of repair. It was lit and ventilated by narrow slits in the walls, which remained uncovered in all weather, making the rooms inside cold, dark, and draughty. She set about renovating them and by the end of the following winter her apartments boasted the latest innovation, a fireplace and chimney, as well as wooden shutters which could be pulled over the arrow slits. Eleanor commissioned a range of tapestries, which were placed on the walls for decoration and insulation. In stark contrast to her husband, Eleanor dressed like a queen, wearing rich gowns lined with fur and silk.

Also in stark contrast to her husband, Eleanor was eager to be involved in decisions which affected her realm, particularly her ancestral lands. King Louis' advisers were not so keen for this to occur and did their best to reduce her influence. Her reign was characterized by a power struggle between the impetuous, young, and passionate Eleanor versus the staid, conservative, and elderly royal advisers, with the weak-willed King Louis caught in the middle.

With such a strong personality, Eleanor was bound to clash with some people. Apparently, she didn't get on at all well with her mother-in-law, and she also raised the ire of Bernard of Clairvaux. Remember Bernard? We met him two episodes ago, when he was instrumental in establishing the Knights Templar. Bernard had clashed with Eleanor's father, and in fact, at one stage their relationship had deteriorated to the extent that they almost came to blows. And he cared little for the worldly, materialistic, young Queen.

Eleanor was more a fan of Bernard's rival, Peter Abelard. Remember Peter, of Abelard-and-Heloise fame? We met him way back in Episode 1. Paris was undergoing an intellectual revival at this time, and Peter was entrancing students with his radical and slightly heretical ideas, that reason had a place in debates over theological matters. His

lectures particularly appealed to women, and it's possible that Eleanor and her sister had listened to one of his speeches.

Strangely, it was not just Queen Eleanor who was clashing with the Church. Young King Louis also started throwing his weight around. Whether it was due to the influence of his young wife or whether he was developing a sense of his own importance, King Louis started to split with the Church that had nurtured him since childhood. The first sign of this new rift appeared in 1141, when Louis decided to annex the large and wealthy County of Toulouse to his domain. It's likely that he was urged on by Eleanor, who believed herself to have a valid claim to the territory, as she was descended from Philippa of Toulouse. The County of Toulouse at this time had been ruled by Count Alfonso Jordan for the past 20 years. Remember Alfonso Jordan? He's Raymond of Toulouse's son, and when we last came across him, he was a baby. Well, now he's all grown up, and he's ruling his father's ancestral lands.

Probably at the urging of Eleanor, Louis failed to consult his father's advisers about his plans, and set about organizing an invasion of Toulouse. Some of his vassals opposed his audacious campaign, among them the wealthy and influential Theobald, Count of Champagne. If you remember, this is the same Theobald who was the nephew of Hugh of Champagne, one of the men responsible for the establishment of the Knights Templar. Anyway, Louis pushed ahead regardless, and led an army through Aquitaine into the County of Toulouse, intending to take the city of Toulouse by surprise. Unfortunately, King Louis had no experience as a military commander. His men were ill-disciplined and poorly organized, and Louis had neglected some of the basic rules of warfare, apparently failing to take enough siege engines with him. When he arrived at Toulouse, it closed its formidable gates on him, and he quickly realized that he had no hope at all of taking the well-fortified and defended city. He was forced to withdraw in embarrassment with his troops.

This incident impacted on an event which ended up being the first real crisis of Louis' reign, and which would be one of the defining events of his life. Eleanor's sixteen year old sister Petronilla had fallen in love. The good news was that the object of her affection, Count Raoul of Vermandois, was a wealthy cousin of the King who held large estates in the north of France, felt the same way about Petronilla, despite being 35 years her senior. The bad news was Count Raoul was already married to the Count of Champagne's sister. Eleanor didn't see a problem with this, and worked behind the scenes to have Count Raoul's marriage annulled.

In the meanwhile, King Louis was busy butting heads with the Church. The Archbishopric of Bourges had fallen vacant. Bourges was an important city, and Louis was determined that one of his own men, his chancellor, be appointed the new Archbishop. However, the Church had different ideas, and duly appointed a different candidate, a Clunic monk, to the role. The monk traveled to Rome, where the Pope confirmed him as Archbishop, but on his return to Bourges he found out that the angry King Louis had shut the city's gates on him. The Pope advised the King to stop behaving like a foolish schoolboy, and even threatened to excommunicate him. But Louis stood his ground, and the Papal appointee eventually sought refuge in the court of Theobald of Champagne.

And he wasn't the only one. Count Theobald's sister and her children turned up as well, seeking accommodation after being thrown out by Count Raoul. King Louis had managed to find three Bishops who were willing to grant an annulment of Count Raoul's marriage.

One of the Bishops was also Count Raoul's brother. The same three Bishops then presided over the marriage between Count Raoul and Petronilla. Count Theobald of Champagne protested to the Pope on his sister's behalf, and his friend Bernard of Clairvaux likewise expressed his concerns. The Pope agreed that it was all a bit much, and ordered Count Raoul to return to his first wife. Count Raoul refused, and both he and Petronilla were excommunicated from the Church.

Determined to finally teach Count Theobald a lesson, King Louis again gathered an army together and invaded Champagne. Apparently deciding to punish Count Theobald by punishing his people, Louis' army burnt crops, set fire to buildings and, according to most chronicles, killed unarmed citizens, including women and children. But the worst was yet to come. In January 1143 King Louis personally led a force into Champagne and proceeded to lay siege to the small town of Vitry. The town was poorly defended, and Louis and his men set fire to its wooden houses, throwing torches into doorways and onto thatched roofs, causing residents to flee for their lives. They fled into the town's cathedral, but the fire from the houses spread, and the wooden roof of the church caught fire and collapsed. Over 1,000 people were burned alive inside the church.

King Louis, from a vantage point looking over the town, heard the screams of the dying citizens, which included women and children, and was struck down with remorse. In fact, that's an understatement. Soon after the event, he was found pale and shaking, unable to speak, in a state of shock. He retreated back to Paris, but the events in Vitry continued to haunt him. He lost his appetite and fell into a deep depression. His nights were full of nightmares and his days full of regret and a spiritual emptiness. His health suffered to the extent that some physicians feared for his life.

Join me next week, as we see Louis try to redeem himself for the fateful events at Vitry, and we see the fallout from his actions.

For further reading, probably the most popular text on Eleanor is by Alison Weir and is called "Eleanor of Aquitaine: By the Wrath of God, Queen of England". But I also really like an earlier text written by Amy Kelly in the 1950's called "Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings". Both of them are excellent, and you can take your pick. Until next week, bye for now.

End