

History of the Crusades.
Episode 27.
Eleanor of Aquitaine Part 3.

Hello again. Last week we left Queen Eleanor and King Louis in the glorious city of Antioch. Queen Eleanor was having a brilliant time in Antioch.

King Louis wasn't. Why? Well, first, there was the annoying fact that most people in Antioch spoke Languedoc, a dialect of French that King Louis didn't speak. Languedoc was the language spoken in Aquitaine, so Eleanor and her vassals felt right at home among the Franks in Antioch. She could carry on conversations with her new best friend, her uncle Raymond, Prince of Antioch, and while her vassals and the locals could follow their conversation, King Louis and his men couldn't. Then there was the whole Raymond-Eleanor relationship. They were spending an awful lot of time together, and rumors were starting to spread that their friendship had developed to an inappropriate level.

And finally, there were Raymond's plans for King Louis and his Crusaders. Ever since Edessa had fallen to the Muslims, Raymond had been keenly aware of Antioch's vulnerability. He had been itching to take the fight to the Muslims, but he just didn't have the manpower, until now. Backed by Eleanor, he had been pestering Louis to gather his men and launch an assault on Aleppo, before trying to retake Edessa. But Louis was having none of it. His personal priority was to get to Jerusalem and fulfill his Crusading vow, and be redeemed of his sins.

Eleanor now threw herself into the conflict between her uncle and her husband. She advised Louis that if he didn't attack Aleppo, she would stay in Antioch with her vassals and leave King Louis to journey to Jerusalem alone. King Louis still didn't budge, so Eleanor dropped a bombshell. She told Louis that she had been thinking about their marriage and had decided that the reason they hadn't been blessed with a son was due to God's displeasure. And why was God displeased? Because in marrying, Louis and Eleanor had broken the laws against consanguinity. These laws prohibited people marrying if they were closely related. Eleanor and Louis were cousins to the fourth and fifth degree, and Eleanor told Louis that she wished to seek an annulment of their marriage to preserve both their souls. She would relinquish her crown and revert back to being the Duchess of Aquitaine. And, of course, a duchess couldn't wander around the Holy Land alone, so she intended to remain in Antioch, under Raymond's protection.

Louis, of course, was devastated by this pronouncement. Louis by this time, was getting quite paranoid about the purity of his soul, and was willing to go to great lengths to avoid being relegated to hell after his death. It is likely that Eleanor used this fear to press her advantage, and it seems that, for a while at least, Louis was considering consenting to her request for an annulment. But then one of his advisers, perhaps recognizing the political fallout for the Kingdom of France if Eleanor's lands reverted back to being outside the direct control of the crown, convinced Louis to oppose her. Instead, Louis was advised to kidnap his wife and take her forcibly to Jerusalem. And that's exactly what he did.

At midnight on the 28th of March 1148, Louis' men burst into Eleanor's apartments in the palace on Mount Silpius. They bundled the protesting Eleanor into a cart and hastily conveyed her through the streets of the sleeping city and out Saint Paul's gate. There

waiting for her was the King and his army, and they all marched southwards towards Tripoli and Jerusalem.

We know that King Louis and his men were met by the Patriarch of Jerusalem and a group of Templars at the gates of Jerusalem, and that their arrival was heralded and celebrated by the Christians of Jerusalem. We also know that King Louis was able to worship at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, fulfilling his vow and redeeming his soul. We also know that King Louis and his Queen spent eleven months in Jerusalem, during which time the Second Crusade just kind of fizzled out. But we know nothing about Eleanor's activities during those eleven months. Nothing at all. She just doesn't get a mention in any of the chronicles composed at the time. This may have been because she kept herself out of the limelight and away from the public eye. But we do know that after celebrating Easter in Jerusalem in 1149, King Louis and his Queen left the Holy Land, setting sail for Italy.

Now, like many things in Eleanor's life, this journey back to Europe was not at all straightforward. The King and Queen took separate ships, and the Queen's ship was captured by a Byzantine fleet in the Aegean Sea, as apparently, Emperor Manuel had ordered that Eleanor and Louis be kidnapped and taken to Constantinople as hostages. Anyway, Eleanor's ship was rescued by a fleet of Sicilian ships, and once again went on its merry way, until a violent storm again separated the ships. The King's ship made it to Italy, but grave fears were held for Eleanor's ship. Two months later, her ship limped into Italy, apparently after having been blown off course as far as Northern Africa. Exhausted and ill after her dramatic voyage, Eleanor spent some time recuperating in Sicily, then traveled to Italy to join her husband. While journeying to Rome, Eleanor received some devastating news. Her uncle Raymond had been killed in a skirmish back in the Middle East, and his head had been taken to Baghdad, where it was now on display over the gates to the city. This news precipitated another round of illness, and the royal journey was delayed while Eleanor made frequent stops to restore her health.

Eventually, the couple made it to Rome, where they were received very warmly by Pope Eugenius. The Pope seems to have taken a shine to the royal couple, and did everything in his power to make their stay in Rome comfortable and to restore cordial relations between them. He dismissed their concerns about the validity of their marriage. Instead, he blessed their union and confirmed its validity within the eyes of the Church. He also soothed Louis' concerns about the lack of success of the Second Crusade, and all in all did his best to patch things up between the couple, on a spiritual level as well as personally and emotionally. And perhaps he was successful to some extent, as it appears that Eleanor fell pregnant again during this time. The couple left Rome and headed northwards towards France, arriving in Paris on 11th of November 1149, after an absence of nearly two and a half years.

But for Eleanor, Paris didn't really feel like home, and a deep discontent started to settle in. The people were happy to see the return of their monarchs, but there was an underlying feeling of disappointment and disquiet about the failure of the Second Crusade and, of course, rumors circulated amongst the citizens about Eleanor's relationship with her uncle Raymond. To make things worse, winter was setting in, and it was to be one of the coldest and bleakest winters in memory. The royal palace became freezing cold and drafty, the streets were empty and everything was quiet and subdued. Eleanor began quarreling with King Louis, who again had returned to his monk-like state, and things didn't really improve when Eleanor gave birth to her second daughter, the Princess Alix, instead of a longed-for son.

By this time, Eleanor had had enough. She was now seriously considering abandoning her marriage and started looking at the practical outcomes of such a move. One thing was certain. If she was to annul her marriage, she would be leaving herself open to fortune seekers and power hungry men from across Europe. While she would lose her crown, her ancestral lands would revert back to her control, making her the richest woman in Europe. She needed to find herself a powerful man to ally herself with, before she proceeded any further with her plans. Enter Henry Plantagenet.

Now, before we discuss Henry in any great depth, we need to take a closer look at his parents. Remember two weeks ago, we discussed the civil war in England and the fact that Matilda, King Henry I's daughter, was fighting King Stephen for the English throne? Well, Henry Plantagenet is the eldest son of Matilda and her French husband, Geoffrey of Anjou. Now, just to backtrack a little more, Geoffrey of Anjou is the son of King Fulk of Jerusalem. Before he left for the Middle East to marry King Baldwin II's daughter Melisende, Fulk did his best to secure the future of his 15-year-old son Geoffrey. He knighted him, then transferred his title and lands to him, making young Geoffrey the Count of Anjou. Then he secured for his son a highly advantageous marriage. He married the 15 year old Jeffrey to the 26 year old Matilda, daughter of King Henry I of England and heiress to the English throne. Trouble was, Geoffrey and Matilda didn't really get along. Matilda was much older than Geoffrey. She was pragmatic, intelligent, learned, and unfortunately, quite arrogant. Geoffrey, on the other hand, was very good looking, flamboyant, energetic and chivalrous. He was so good looking, in fact, that one of his nicknames was Geoffrey the Fair. He often decorated his helmet with a sprig of broom, a plant which bore the Latin name "plant genista", and thus became known as Geoffrey Plantagenet. His son Henry also acquired this nickname, and the line of English kings descended from Henry became known to history as the Plantagenets.

Now, perhaps because he was unusually good looking and didn't get on with his wife, Geoffrey developed quite a reputation for having adulterous affairs. He was even rumored to have had an affair with Eleanor. If that was the case, it would have made for some awkward moments in those early meetings between Eleanor, Geoffrey, and Geoffrey's son Henry.

Anyway, as you already know, Matilda had been fighting King Stephen for the English crown, but things really hadn't gone that well for her in the civil war. She was arrogant and suffered from poor judgment at times, and well, she was a woman. There wasn't really widespread support for her in England. By the late 1140's, Matilda had pretty much abandoned all hope of being crowned Queen of England. Instead, Matilda and Geoffrey set about consolidating their power-base in France, and pinned all their royal ambitions on their eldest son, Henry.

Henry Plantagenet was King Henry I's grandson. He therefore had a strong claim to the English throne. Thanks to his father, he was also heir to vast estates in France. The young Henry Plantagenet's future was looking very bright indeed. He bore all the hallmarks of becoming a very, very powerful man. In August of 1151 Count Geoffrey of Anjou and the young Henry Plantagenet visited King Louis' court in Paris. At this time, Geoffrey the Fair was in his late thirties. His son Henry was 18 years old and had recently been made Duke of Normandy. Queen Eleanor was 29 years old.

The Queen of France met the young Duke, and it seems they quickly struck up rather a strong friendship. Henry was unlike King Louis in almost every respect. Highly intelligent, he had been educated from an early age with the hope that he would become King. He was striking to look at, but not as handsome as his father, with reddish hair and a stocky face and body. He was prone to outbursts of temper and had a restless, energetic nature. He was so energetic that he rarely sat down, even while eating, always pacing and thinking, his hands always busy with some task or another. He rode and walked miles each day. And unlike Louis, he wasn't pious. In his later life, one of his favorite curses was "By the eyes of God", which in those days was considered highly blasphemous.

Anyway, as I said before, Eleanor and Henry met in Paris. Unfortunately, we can't be sure exactly what went on between them or exactly what was said, but it's likely that by the time Henry left Paris a few weeks later they had reached an understanding, that Eleanor would work to have her marriage annulled, and that upon securing the annulment she would marry Henry.

Henry, Duke of Normandy and Geoffrey, Count of Anjou rode home to Anjou in September of 1151. It was unseasonably hot, and while taking a break from the journey, Geoffrey decided to swim in a stream by the roadside. This proved to be an unfortunate decision, as the cold water ended up giving him a chill, and he came down with a fever and died three days later. Henry was now Count of Anjou, as well as Duke of Normandy.

Fast forward to six months later, and Eleanor finally gets her wish. A synod of Bishops met for the purpose of dissolving the marriage of the King and Queen of France. Now it's likely that Louis doesn't know about Eleanor's plans. It's bad enough that, upon the dissolution of the marriage, the French crown will lose direct control over Eleanor's ancestral lands. If those lands were joined to Normandy and Anjou, Louis would be facing a formidable and threatening power base. Yet King Louis accepted the annulment, and Eleanor agreed that the custody of her two daughters would remain with the King. She then swore allegiance to Louis as her overlord, and that was that. On the 11th of March 1152, the royal marriage was annulled on the grounds of consanguinity, and Eleanor, Queen of France became Eleanor, Duchess of Aquitaine and Countess of Poitou.

Eleanor departed for Poitiers. She would never see King Louis again. Eight weeks later, Henry came to Poitou and married Eleanor. The vast estates of the couple were joined, and between them they ruled over half of what is now modern France. In celebration of their union, Henry and Eleanor commissioned a stained glass window for the cathedral at Poitiers. The image in the window shows Eleanor and Henry kneeling and donating a window to the church, and it can still be seen today, nearly 900 years after it was installed.

But there was someone who wasn't celebrating the union: King Louis. When he found out that Eleanor had married Henry without his permission, which should have been sought as Henry was overlord to them both, he was furious. He declared the marriage treasonous and decided to go to war. He hastily mustered an army and marched into Normandy. But Louis' track record of disastrous military campaigns wasn't about to improve. Henry countered Louis' forces, and Louis became ill with a fever. After a number of skirmishes, Henry gained the upper hand, and six weeks later was the clear victor. King Louis quickly negotiated a truce.

Not content to be the most powerful nobleman in just one country, Henry then decided to invade England. In January 1153, he set sail from Normandy with a fleet of 26 ships, 3,000

foot soldiers and 140 knights, intending to confront King Stephen. War-weary England rose to counter the French invasion, but it became increasingly clear to everyone that Henry's star was on the rise, while that of King Stephen was on the wane. While Henry was in England, King Stephen's eldest son and heir died, choking on a dish of eels. In contrast, Eleanor bore Henry a son while he was away on campaign, whom she named William, after her father.

The demoralized King Stephen was urged by his advisers and the Church to negotiate a truce with Henry, and that's exactly what he did. King Stephen named Henry heir to the English throne. In return, Henry agreed to swear homage to King Stephen for the remainder of his reign and to leave England, wracked for so long by civil war, in peace. King Stephen wasn't to enjoy the peaceful situation for long. Some ten months after the treaty was signed, he died.

The news reached Henry, and arrangements were made for Henry, Eleanor and baby William to travel to England. They were received warmly by the people of England, and on the 19th of December 1154, in Westminster Abbey, Henry and Eleanor were crowned King and Queen of England.

Now I bet you're thinking "Ah well, that's the end of the Eleanor of Aquitaine episodes. After all, Eleanor was Queen of France. She went on the Second Crusade. Now she's Queen of England. Surely that's enough for one lifetime." But no. Eleanor's long life still has a while to play out. She gives birth to more sons, two of whom end up becoming kings, and one of whom is a central figure in the Third Crusade. And her marriage to King Henry deteriorates. In fact, their marriage ends up being one of the most stormy and tumultuous royal marriages in English history, and that's saying something. King Henry actually ends up imprisoning Queen Eleanor for nearly a decade. "What?" I hear you say, "What on earth could Queen Eleanor have done to justify her own husband incarcerating her for nearly ten years?" Well, you'll have to join me next week to find out, in what I promise will be the final episode on Eleanor of Aquitaine. Until next week, bye for now.

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