

History of the Crusades.
Episode 28.
Eleanor of Aquitaine Part 4.

Hello again. Last week we saw Eleanor abandon the French crown. She then married Henry Duke of Normandy and later became Queen of England when Henry succeeded King Stephen to the English throne.

So, what was life like in England? In one word, it was busy. The 21 year old King Henry II certainly had his work cut out for him. Administering his French territory would be challenging enough for most people. On top of being overlord to half of France, with all the difficulties that entailed, Henry was also King of England, and England was in a sorry state. Battered and bruised after 19 years of anarchy and civil war, the country needed some urgent attention. Luckily, Henry was up to the challenge.

He realized that to get the economy up and running again, to encourage people to grow produce to sell and to spend their days working productively, they needed to feel safe. So his first priority was to put in place a judicial system to do this. He divided the country into administrative regions. He appointed a justice to each region whose role it was to travel around, hearing cases and settling disputes. In a radical move, Henry gradually replaced trial by ordeal with trial by jury, thus laying the foundation for the system of common law in England that survives to this day. He levied taxes, managed to increase the income of the crown, and sacked any corrupt officials he came across. And all his hard work paid off. As the country became safer, the wheels of trade and industry slowly crept into life and started to turn. England was back in business.

In order to ensure that his reforms were being correctly carried out, Henry had to travel the length and breadth of England. The crown owned around 60 castles and a number of hunting lodges. On his endless tour around England, Henry and Eleanor and the royal court would stay in these places, or at a private manor house or abbey, if that was closer to where Henry decided he needed to be. They tended to not stay very long in one place, which was a relief for everyone concerned.

The royal court numbered around 250 people. To give you an idea of the size of Henry's roaming entourage. Here is a few of the people who would be constantly at his side: chief administrators; the head of the departments of state; the Chancellor; and the Lord President of the council, accompanied of course, by their clerks, and scribes with parchments, ink, and so forth, stayed close to the King; as did the treasurer, among whose duties it was to guard the royal treasure, which was kept in a chest near Henry's bed. Then there were the royal household attendants: the steward; the chamberlain; the marshal and the Lord High Constable; stablemen; the King's personal bodyguard; and a small army of servants: cooks, maids, a butler, keeper of the cellars, keeper of the hounds, laundresses, a tailor, you get the picture.

The Queen also had her own attendants: her treasurer, chancellor, clerk chamberlain, knights, ladies and master of the horse. And the royal court didn't exactly travel light. They traveled with their own cooking equipment, chamber pots, hunting equipment, tables, chairs, feather beds and clothing.

A royal visit to a private residence, while prestigious, was often viewed with horror by the owner of the house. While the royal household came with its own equipment, trying to find food and wine for 250 people, not to mention emptying the chamber pots of 250 people, would try any household, no matter how large or wealthy. Often, by the end of an extended stay, the guests would be served rotten meat and rancid ale and wine, having exhausted the more palatable supplies. But if Henry was going to be successful in carrying out his reforms and getting England back on her feet again, he needed to surround himself with talented, hard working administrators. And if that meant they sometimes had to eat rotten food and suffer the odd discomfort, well that didn't worry Henry a bit.

One of the most talented and hardworking of Henry servants was his chancellor, Thomas Becket. A tall, slim man with dark hair, Becket was a tireless worker who soon impressed Henry with his abilities. Eventually, the two formed a close friendship and, when they weren't working, they'd take time off together, hunting, feasting and engaging in witty banter. Becket developed a taste for luxury, which Henry seemed happy to indulge, and eventually he trusted Becket enough to leave all the affairs of state in Becket's hands, if Henry needed to go to France or to take a few days off.

Then, in the year 1161 the Archbishopric of Canterbury, became vacant, and Henry came up with a great idea. He had been intent on working to curb the power of the Church in England, and decided that appointing his own man as Archbishop of Canterbury would go quite some way towards achieving this goal. And who best to appoint to this role than his best friend, the loyal, the talented and reliable Thomas Becket? Like Henry, Becket was not a religious man, and Henry thought the appointment would be the perfect way to bring the Church to heel in his kingdom. It seems that Becket was reluctant to take on the role, but Henry's will prevailed, and in mid-1162 Thomas Becket was ordained as a priest and then was formally consecrated as Archbishop of Canterbury.

However, it seems that Henry had misjudged his friend. Thomas Becket was the sort of man who gave 110% to whatever task was at hand. Being Chancellor of England, he would work until he dropped, wear luxurious clothes, and live in an impressive mansion, because that's what a successful Chancellor does. Friend to a King, he would spend hours with Henry, happy to be the butt of his practical jokes, amusing him with witty conversation, and doing everything in his power to ensure the happiness of his King. And now he was the Archbishop of Canterbury.

To Henry's initial amusement and then growing horror, Thomas Becket threw himself into this new role, spending all his energy and talents towards being the best Archbishop of Canterbury there ever was. He discarded his expensive clothes and began dressing in the simple robes of a monk, even wearing a hair shirt underneath his robes, to purify his soul through the constant discomfort of his body. He abandoned his excessive lifestyle, fasting on bread for days on end, and undertaking acts of charity, including washing the feet of thirteen beggars every day. He abandoned his role as Chancellor and gave all his time to the Church, spending his days in the service of his new vocation and his nights in prayer.

As Becket started using his talents to increase the power of the Church instead of decreasing it, as had been Henry's intention, the relationship between the two men started to deteriorate. Actually, that's an understatement. As the years passed, Archbishop Becket forbade marriages that were of benefit to the crown, excommunicated allies of the crown on flimsy grounds, and reportedly did his best to ensure that crimes by clerks, which generally involved corruption against the crown, went unpunished. Henry then tried to pass

a law forcing the Church to hand clerks over to the crown for sentencing. Becket refused to set his seal on the law, and then Henry tried to have him removed from office by charging him with contempt of court. Becket refused to submit the Church to the King's justice, and instead fled to France.

This battle of wills between two intelligent and headstrong men continued for the next six years, and culminated in Becket excommunicating some Bishops who supported the King. The King was in France at the time, and three of the Bishops traveled to meet him, complaining of Becket's conduct. On hearing the news, Henry flew into a rage and is alleged to have said, "Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?" Four knights in Henry's household, then took it upon themselves to travel to England and fix the problem once and for all. They confronted Archbishop Becket in his cathedral in Canterbury, where they bade him to restore to communion those whom he had excommunicated. Becket refused, and an argument ensued. The knights' swords were drawn, despite the fact that they were inside a church, and things soon got out of hand. One of the knights struck the Archbishop with his sword, the others joined in, with the result that Archbishop Becket was murdered in his own cathedral.

The murder sent shockwaves throughout Europe, and a horrified King Henry was generally blamed for the crime. He spent much of the remainder of his reign trying to atone for this sin, but the damage was done. King Henry II would go down in history, not as the King who rescued England from civil war and who laid the foundations of a judicial system which prevails across most of the western world to this day, but as the King who killed Thomas Becket.

And as for the Archbishop, as Henry's star waned, Thomas Becket's posthumous star rose and rose and rose. People started visiting the cathedral to see the place where he was killed, and eventually miracles were reported to be occurring there. To cut a long story short, Thomas Becket was made into a saint, and his tomb and cathedral ended up attracting pilgrims from all over Europe. Eventually, it rivaled Santiago de Compostela as one of Latin Christendom's premier pilgrim destinations. The book "The Canterbury Tales" by Geoffrey Chaucer, one of the seminal works of early English literature, is a collection of stories by a group of pilgrims on their way to visit the shrine of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral.

It is shortly after the murder of Thomas Becket that Eleanor's feelings seem to have turned against her husband. Was it because of Becket's death that a rift started appearing between them? It might have been. Certainly, public sentiment turned against Henry, who was seen as causing the death of the suddenly popular Bishop. Or it might have been something else. Henry was rumored to have been indulging in relations with other women, and perhaps it was this that caused the rift. Whatever the cause, Eleanor decided to formalize the split by moving her court back to her ancestral lands. She set herself up at Poitiers with her favorite son, the 15 year old Richard.

Up until this time, Eleanor Queen of England, has been busy, very busy. She spent her days accompanying her husband on his tours around his realm, and attending to matters of her household and state. There were occasions early in his reign, when both King Henry and Chancellor Becket were abroad, that Henry left Queen Eleanor in charge of England, so she must have been adept at handling administrative matters. When she wasn't busy with the formalities of being Queen of England, she was actively involved in administering

her own lands in France. What spare time she had was filled with reading, being entertained by musicians, attending to family matters, and having children. Lots of them.

By the time of Thomas Becket's death, Eleanor had borne King Henry eight children. The eldest, William, had died when he was only three years old, and her next eldest son, Henry, was being groomed to succeed her husband as King of England. In fact, he had already been crowned in a coronation ceremony attended by his parents, a practice that was common at the time, and had married King Louis of France's daughter by his second wife Constance, a girl called Marguerite. Her other children, in descending order of age, were Matilda, Richard, Geoffrey, Eleanor, Joanna and John.

Of all her children, Richard was her clear favorite. He had spent most of his childhood in Eleanor's domain in France and had recently been proclaimed Duke of Aquitaine. He spoke Eleanor's native tongue, Languedoc, and was happy to leave England to his older brother, spending all his time in Aquitaine and Poitou.

Now there's a couple of things you need to know about these children. King Henry and Queen Eleanor were surprisingly lenient parents. Unusually for this age, they both delighted in indulging their children's every whim, with the unfortunate result that their sons in particular, became headstrong, self centered young men who reacted badly to discipline. As was common among royal families, all the children were betrothed at an early age, to partners who would provide a political advantage to King Henry, and his sons were granted lands and titles. And here we can see a problem brewing. King Henry had lost the support of many of his subjects after the murder of Thomas Becket, but instead of working with their father to consolidate and strengthen his rule, his older sons began to undermine him. Having their own lands and titles, they wanted to be free to exercise power in their own right.

They were used to getting their own way, but for King Henry, this was a step too far. He started taking measures to curb the power of his sons, particularly the increasingly arrogant and demanding young Henry. And did his sons surrender to the will of their father, who was after all, the King of England? No, they didn't. Now, when we talk about King Henry's sons rising up against him, we only mean the three eldest boys, Henry, Richard and Geoffrey. John at this time is only five years of age, and too young to join the rebellion.

We've met the younger Henry and Richard. What about Geoffrey? Well, Geoffrey is the Duke of Brittany and isn't as good looking or likable as his brothers. He's possibly the most intelligent of the three, but was increasingly gaining a reputation for being untrustworthy, dishonest and scheming. Like Richard, Geoffrey is joining the young Henry to oppose his father, not because he supports young Henry, but because he wants to be free to rule his designated lands in his own right.

So the three sons meet and start scheming against their father. Who's willing to support them? Well, the King of France, for one. Always happy to see his powerful rival take a bit of a hit, King Louis places all his considerable resources at his son-in-law's disposal. The boys also gain the support of the King of Scotland, for much the same reason. Gaining the support of the King of France meant that most of the French nobility also fell into line and were willing to fight for the young dukes.

And Eleanor, where did she fit in all of this? Well, although she was essentially living apart from Henry, they were still married, and King Henry assumed Eleanor would give him her full support, but she didn't. In a move which contravened her marriage vows, Eleanor opposed Henry and gave her rebellious sons her full support.

So the sons rose up against their father. How did that go? Yeah, not so well. The uprising never really got past the rebellion stage. The sons were too inexperienced to do anything really serious, like raise an army and invade England, and although they had King Louis to advise them, King Louis's military record kind of spoke for itself. But the rebellion caused quite a headache for King Henry. There were skirmishes in which castles were besieged and towns and villages burned and looted. Most of the fighting took place in Normandy, while the King of Scotland took advantage of the situation and attempted to invade northern England.

King Henry by this time started to have his doubts about Eleanor's loyalty. He commanded the Archbishop of Rouen to write to her, reminding her of her wifely duties and urging her to speak to her sons and bring them into submission, threatening her with excommunication if she failed to do so. The letter didn't sway Eleanor from her course, and there's no indication that she even bothered to respond to it. Instead, she left Poitiers disguised as a man, intending to meet her sons in Paris, but she was apprehended by King Henry's men and was detained in custody.

The rebellion carried on in fits and starts, and while Henry was able to put out the fires as soon as they started, he found it increasingly disturbing that his much loved and pampered sons would treat him this way. The more he thought about it, the clearer it became. The rebellion was divine retribution for his role in the murder of Thomas Becket. And if that was the case, there was only one way to resolve the issue: penance. Henry rode to Canterbury, and once there he removed his robes and, dressed only in a woollen smock, he walked barefoot to the cathedral. He prayed at Becket's tomb, then requested absolution from the 70 or so monks present inside the church. He removed his smock and received a flogging from the monks, one or two lashes from each of the monks present. He then spent the night alone in the cathedral, fasting and praying. The next morning, the exhausted and weakened King departed Canterbury for London.

Almost immediately he received some positive news. His forces had won a decisive victory against the rebels in England, and had captured the King of Scotland. As a result, the rebellion in England collapsed. Henry viewed this as a sign of divine forgiveness, and he hastily gathered his forces with the aim of crushing the rebellion in France, and he succeeded. King Louis and Henry's sons were forced to the negotiating table. The King of Scotland agreed to surrender Scotland to England and to submit to Henry as his overlord. Henry forgave his sons and increased the income they were allocated from their lands, but he didn't allow them to exercise any power over their territories. All in all, Henry was very generous in his terms and forgave everyone involved in the rebellion. Everyone, that is, except for Eleanor.

Henry was to keep Eleanor prisoner for the remainder of his life. Now it wasn't quite as bad as you might think. She certainly wasn't chained to a wall in a dungeon or anything like that. She was confined to various manor houses of Henry's choosing. Watched over carefully by Henry's men, her visitors were strictly controlled, and she was only allowed one personal maid. Henry at this time considered having his marriage annulled, but that would mean he would lose control of Eleanor's lands, so he remained married, but her

confinement enabled him to indulge in numerous affairs, most notably with his favorite, Rosamund. After Rosamund died, he started up a relationship with Alice of France, who was betrothed to his son Richard. Understandably, this caused some controversy at the time.

As for his wayward sons, Duke Richard was kept busy ruling his mother's lands. Some of her vassals were upset at how Eleanor was being treated, and Richard spent his days trying to subdue the nobility, and quashing rebellions as they occurred. The other, less busy sons, soon reverted back to their rebellious ways. When they weren't fighting each other they were making life difficult for Henry, who spent most of his time trying to stay one step ahead of their intriguing and their plans to seize power for themselves.

Then, in June 1183, disaster struck. King Henry had cut off the young Henry's allowance, and as a result, young Henry had been making a thorough nuisance of himself, pillaging his way through rural France, sacking monasteries and making away with whatever treasure he could. The weather has been unusually hot, and young Henry fell ill with dysentery and a fever. His illness worsened, and the young Henry sent a message to King Henry that he was dying. Sensing a trap, King Henry stayed away, but he sent the young Henry a sapphire ring as a token of his forgiveness, along with some money and a physician. The physician was unable to help, and on Saturday the 11th of June, the young King Henry, heir to the English throne, died. He was wearing his father's sapphire ring when he died, and after his death it proved impossible to remove.

The King was beside himself with grief. In contrast, when Eleanor was told of her son's death, she took it quite calmly, saying that she had dreamt of her son lying on a tomb wearing a sapphire ring. Young Henry's death meant that Duke Richard was now heir to the English throne, as well as ruler of Poitou and Aquitaine, and heir to the lands of Normandy and Anjou. Duke Richard ends up becoming King of England in due course, and becomes known to history as Richard the Lionheart. He is also a central figure in the Third Crusade, and will have his own episodes when we get to our discussions of the Third Crusade, so we won't spend any more time on him here.

Eleanor's other child of note is her youngest, John. John is everyone's nightmare little brother. As King Henry's favorite legitimate son, he was over-indulged by his doting father, and developed a taste for luxury and excess, but was also self-indulgent, spiteful and lazy. The nightmare little brother eventually became a nightmare King of England. He was the sort of king who seemingly had no interest in good governance, but instead raised taxes to fund his lavish lifestyle, while making unwise, reckless decisions which impacted disastrously on his realm. Eventually, the English nobles had enough and rose up against John, forcing him to sign a document called the Magna Carta, which limited his power and gave his subjects more say in government. The signing by King John of the Magna Carta is seen by many as the first step on the road to democracy in England.

Anyway, back to Eleanor. On the 6th of July 1189 King Henry died, and as a result, Eleanor was released from captivity. When her son Richard was crowned King, Eleanor worked tirelessly in support of her son. She was 67 years of age upon her release, which by medieval standards made her a very old woman. But she still seemed to possess boundless energy, and still had a desire to exert her influence in the affairs of state. Luckily, in contrast to her earlier days, she was now also possessed of that trait so vital for a successful ruler: wisdom.

Her son, Richard, now King Richard I of England, was a stranger to his English subjects. Having spent most of his life in France and unable to speak English, King Richard would only spend a total of ten months in England during his reign. England was in Eleanor's hands. She traveled all over the country, ensuring that it was governed to her liking, and dispensing justice in the name of the King. She kept the nobility in check by awarding favors to those loyal to the King, and won the support of the people by relaxing some unpopular and harsh laws. All in all, the elderly Eleanor, in stark contrast to her younger self, proved herself an excellent administrator. When Richard left Europe to embark on the Third Crusade, he appointed Eleanor as regent. Eleanor now had Richard's lands in France to administer as well as those in England. Tirelessly travelling through France as well as spending time in England, Eleanor proved herself up to the challenge.

But eventually, at the age of 72, after a hectic five years consolidating her son's rule, she retired to Fontevraud Abbey in France, where she lived as a guest and had her own apartments in return for a generous donation to the abbey and Church. She remained there until Richard's death in April 1199. Richard left no heirs, and his younger brother John took up the crown, his other brother Geoffrey having died some years earlier. Eleanor removed herself from retirement and did the best she could to settle John into his new role. She toured around England and France, covering a distance of around 1,000 miles, in the days where travelling was at best uncomfortable, and at worst highly dangerous.

Her son's position consolidated as best it could be, she again retired to Fontevraud Abbey, but she still couldn't be completely at rest. Visited by King John, called upon to dispense advice and to mediate disputes, Eleanor remained busy. She did her best to patch up relations between King John and the Church, King John and the English barons, King John and his relatives, and King John and the King of France. Despite her best efforts, Eleanor couldn't make up for her son's lack of military talent and poor decision making, and his lands in France began to fall to the French king. Some fell due to battles lost by King John, and other regions decided to transfer their allegiance voluntarily to the French King.

By early 1204 King John had ceded Normandy to France, and shortly after, on the 1st of April 1204, the 82 year old Eleanor died, probably at Fontevraud Abbey. Her body was buried in the crypt at the abbey, and her tomb was constructed, lying between the tombs of her husband King Henry II and her son King Richard I. An effigy was made of Eleanor, a likeness to lie on top of her tomb. Traditionally, effigies have been shown sleeping, finally at rest. Eleanor's effigy isn't sleeping. She's reading a book, and this, I think, sums up Eleanor's life. She didn't lie down quietly like the others. She didn't always do what was expected of her. Instead, she forged her own path, using her energies in the service of her realm, right until the end of her life, when she should have been resting. Why rest when you can still be of use? Why lie asleep on your tomb for eternity, when you could be reading a book? It was this ability to forge her own path which made Eleanor one of the most interesting and influential figures of the Middle Ages.

If you want to pay your respects to Eleanor, you can visit her tomb at Fontevraud Abbey today. The Abbey was vandalized and damaged during the French Revolution, and the bones of Eleanor and her Kings were scattered and never recovered. But in the 1960's a restoration project saw four tombs and effigies restored, and they now lie in the Abbey's church.

And so ends our examination of Eleanor of Aquitaine, and it's also the end of our specialist episodes. Join me next week as we get back to the main game and embark on the Second Crusade. Until next week, bye for now.

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