

Articles

A Short Biography of Richard I

Richard I (or “Coeur-de-Lion”) was born on September 8, 1157 in Oxford, England. The third son of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, he was over six feet tall with reddish hair and blue eyes. He could read and write Latin and could compose verse in both French and Provençal. He loved music and was a patron of the arts. He was also ruthless, brutal, and an incredible war leader. He was Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine. He became King of England in 1189. Richard would rule over England for ten years, yet he spent less than eight months in that country and never learned to speak the English language.



Richard’s relationship with his family was, at best, strained and, at worst, openly hostile. Henry II refused to give his sons the power associated with their noble titles. Richard was involved in a civil war with his brothers, Henry the Younger and Geoffrey, against their father in 1173-1174. The rebellion was a failure. In 1182, his older brother, Henry the Younger, plotted with some of Aquitaine’s nobles to unseat Richard. Geoffrey and John allied with Henry the Younger and declared war. Their armies proceeded to raid Poitou and Aquitaine. Richard crushed the rebellion. John and Geoffrey declared war on Richard again in 1184 and attempted to take Poitou by force with the apparent blessing of Henry II. They were unsuccessful due to Richard’s military prowess. Henry II finally called his sons to England and forced a truce between them. In 1188, Richard declared war on his father with the aid of Phillip II of France. After a brief but destructive campaign, Henry II, in declining health, was defeated by Richard’s forces. The terms of the peace treaty were so

bitter that Henry II’s last words to Richard were “God grant that I may not die until I have had my revenge upon you”. Henry II did not get his wish and died on July 6, 1189. John would later conspire with Duke Leopold IV of Austria to keep Richard imprisoned following Richard’s involvement in the Third Crusade. The two were reconciled only through the efforts of Eleanor, their mother.

Richard’s exploits at war were legendary. He laid siege to the castle of Taillebourg in 1179. The castle was regarded as impregnable. It was protected by three inner walls and was unapproachable from three sides. Richard took the castle in less than ten days.

He is perhaps best known for his involvement in the Third Crusade. Richard, together with the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa and Phillip II of France, led a European army to recover the crusader cities in Palestine following their capture by Saladin and his Saracen armies. On his way to Palestine, he rescued his sister Joanna in Sicily and conquered the island of Cyprus. His army lifted the two-year siege on the City of Acre with the aid of King Phillip on July 12, 1191. He later gave the order to massacre over 2,600 Muslim prisoners. He and his army beat Saladin's forces at the Battle of Arsuf and retook Jaffa, the location of modern Tel Aviv, as well as the cities of Ascalon and Darum. While he was never able to retake the city of Jerusalem, his efforts reestablished the Latin kingdoms in Palestine, which had been on the verge of extinction.

Richard died on April 6, 1199 from wounds inflicted by an arrow during a siege in Chalus, France. He was forty-one years old. His body was buried at Fontevrault Abbey at the feet of his father. His heart was buried at Rouen, the capital of Normandy. He is regarded as one of the heroes of the Crusades and is one of the best-known Kings of England.

Lord Sir Paul de Marseilles

Sources: Frank McLynn, *Richard and John, Kings at War* (Da Capo Press, 2007); Alison Weir, *Eleanor of Aquitaine* (Ballantine Books, 1999); Mike Ashley, *A Brief History of British Kings and Queens* (Carroll & Graf, 2002).