

Eleanor, Richard and John

History

Lesson 4 of an enquiry of 4 lessons

Enquiry: What can the life of Eleanor of Aquitaine tell us about who held power in the Middle Ages?

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A Free Woman

In 1189 King Henry II died and Richard became King of England. The crown had passed from Eleanor's husband to her son. For the first few weeks, after his father's death, Richard had to deal with unrest in Normandy. Richard sent an order to England to have his mother Eleanor freed, and instructed that she should have 'the power of doing whatever she wished in the kingdom.' This was a new situation for Eleanor. When she was Queen of England her **authority** came from being married to Henry. Even in Aquitaine she never had full control. Now, her son Richard was giving her the freedom to rule England on his behalf. Eleanor became the highest power in the land!



The return of the King

Whilst Richard was absent from England, Eleanor ruled in his name. This was popular in England. Her imprisonment had kept her out of the bitter arguments between Henry and his sons, and she became a figure of loyalty determined to keep the **Angevin Empire** safe.

Richard returned to England in September 1189 to be **coronated**. Eleanor did not shrink into the background on the return of her son. She remained by the King's side as one of his key advisors and writers at the time note her as an influential presence in Richard's royal councils. Her power and influence in England was clear for all to see.



A Crusading King

Richard, however, was only in England for seventeen weeks. Like his mother before him, Richard was determined to go on **Crusade**. In December 1189 he travelled to France to raise the money and men needed for this journey. Eleanor, who had recently been travelling around Europe on Richard's behalf, returned to look after England whilst Richard was absent. Richard knew England would be in safe hands. Eleanor had recently returned from discussions with the new Pope in Rome, proving her status as a powerful and influential woman. That status was needed, because in England, her youngest son John was causing problems.



Tensions between brothers

John, the youngest son, had big ambitions. Despite being Henry II's favourite, John had not been given any land when his father died. He decided to use Richard's absence from England to try and take control of England by capturing key castles. He **allied** with the King of France and the pair tried to capture Richard's lands in France. John had missed one crucial thing - his mother was in charge of those lands whilst Richard was away. She threatened to remove John's lands and castles in England if he continued to work with the French king. Thanks to Eleanor's influence, John backed down.



Captured King

King Richard began his journey back from the Crusade in October 1192. By the end of the year he had been captured and taken prisoner in Austria. His **ransom** was very high: 100,000 silver marks. John and the King of France acted again. They told the people of England that Richard had died on Crusade and they tried to invade the country. Using her power and contacts Eleanor stopped John's rebellion in England, and raised enough money through taxes and pleas to the Barons to get Richard released from his imprisonment. In 1194 Eleanor and Richard were reunited.



Richard and John

In 1194 Eleanor organised a meeting between Richard and John in Normandy. Here, Richard forgave John for his actions whilst he was away. The brothers then agreed to work together to fight against the French King. Their reunion suggested the Angevin Empire was safe, and so Eleanor decided to retire to an abbey near Aquitaine. Here she could keep an eye on Aquitaine and her sons in England and Normandy, yet, this was to change in 1199. King Richard was in Aquitaine crushing a revolt by one of the French Barons. Ultimately, Richard was shot with an arrow, which led to this death.



King John

Richard had no heirs, so control of the Angevin Empire passed to John. King John had no experience of ruling and immediately faced challenges. He decided to focus his attention on keeping control of Normandy and England. Eleanor was called upon to help defend Aquitaine against the King of France. Aged 75 she headed an army against John's enemies in France. In order to end the conflict, Eleanor met the king of France and payed **homage** to him. This was highly unusual - it was assumed homage couldn't be performed by a woman, and should be done by her husband or son instead. Eleanor continued to challenge expectations and asserted her power over Aquitaine.



Eleanor's final years

John's military action and Eleanor's act of homage saw off the immediate threat to John's rule. John did not, however, have his mother's skill for ruling. He found himself in more and more arguments and battles with the powerful Barons of France. Eleanor spent her final years trying to help John resolve these arguments. In 1204 aged 80 Eleanor died. In her final days the Angevin Empire collapsed - John lost control of Normandy and Anjou, lands ruled by the English kings for over a century. Thanks to Eleanor's efforts, the only land in France that remained under the control of the King John was Aquitaine.



Glossary

Allied - joined together by a formal agreement.

Authority - the official power to make decisions or to control people.

Coronated - the ceremony to officially be made King or Queen.

Crusade - journey to the Holy Land to recapture land for the Christians.

Defected - to leave your country and join an enemy country.

Homage - to show your respect for someone by praising them in public.

Ransom - money that is demanded for the return of someone being kept prisoner.



Questions:

1. When was Eleanor released from her imprisonment?
2. What was Eleanor's role whilst King Richard I was away from the country?
3. Why did John rebel against his brother?
4. What was Eleanor's role whilst John was King of England?
5. How did Eleanor make sure that Aquitaine remained under the control of the English king?

