

# A Family Conflict Set in Stone:

The story of Henry, eldest son of Henry II of England



The faces of Henry II and his wife Eleanor on the walls of the church at Candés.

## Rouen: an excess of grief

One such sanitised tomb stands forgotten on the north side of the ambulatory of the cathedral of Rouen, in France. It originally held the mortal remains of Henry (1155-1183), the eldest surviving son of King Henry II of England - until it was

emptied by the *Sans Couloottes* during the French revolution. The lid of the sarcophagus has a fine, stone effigy of a young medieval knight calmly gazing upwards into heaven, with his feet resting on a lion. Strange then, that such spiritual serenity and focus of purpose were so rarely seen in young Henry's life - and how much more the pity.

Rather, the effigy is a reflection of a

very rare commodity: medieval public opinion. "I charge you not with grief, but with excess of grief," wrote Peter of Blois to his father, Henry II. And as the cortege travelled northwards from Limousin to Normandy, there was an unexpected outpouring of intense, popular grief. It was associated with claims of miraculous cures, either by touching the bier or even the place



“Building for the future”: how often have we heard this particular political sound bite? Yet, at its most basic level, it illustrates our confidence in the survival of brick and stone long after we are gone. Archaeology is founded on this premise: institutions like the British Museum are full of stunning examples. Indeed, most of us assume that our last resting place will be marked by stone and like the Taj Mahal, reflect our better nature for the admiration of our descendants. However, these public memorials - with their carefully chosen words, airbrushed image, and neutral emotion – are at best, dull and at worst, dishonest...



(From left to right) The faces of young Henry, his wife Margaret and the Archbishop of Rouen, who was present at the ceremony in Anjou.

where it had rested. A supernatural column of light was said to illuminate the coffin each night. Such was the mass emotion that, when the funeral reached Le Mans, the bishop, - with an eye to future Episcopal funds - decided to inter the body in his cathedral. The Dean of Rouen had to resort to a royal warrant to obtain its release, with the result that the final ceremony was held more than a

month after young Henry's death.

However, even this closure did not settle public feeling which continued unabated throughout the Plantagenet orbit. In England, the Archdeacon of Wells (probably with the tacit support of the imprisoned Queen Eleanor) preached a sermon proposing sainthood for the late prince. The headline spread across the country, even reaching Ralph

the chronicler, in his monastery at Coggleshall, in Essex.

Yet throughout all this, despite the public unanimity, individuals would have acknowledged that young Henry was certainly no saint. Famous, fashionable and flamboyant, he had been the fickle darling of Western Europe for the previous quarter century. Even the medieval chroniclers, like our



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### Matilda and Richard are carved beside young Henry



modern-day broadsheet newspapers, could not resist retelling the tittle-tattle or analysing the fluctuations in support for the royal family. To find the real young Henry and the family conflict that led directly to his death, we need to look beyond the eulogy and the effigy - to the stones of Candes and Clairvaux, Rocamadour and Martel.

#### Candes: a family portrait

The earliest known image of young Henry is among a family group-portrait carved in stone outside the main door of the parish church at Candes, near Chinon in France. Overlooking the confluence of the rivers Vienne and Loire, the historical site is very ancient, predating the death of St Martin of Tours (d. 397AD) within its walls. More than seven and a half centuries later, it again received prominence when Henry, Count of Anjou and Maine (and also king of England) and his wife, Eleanor, Duchess of Aquitaine, adopted it as their collegiate church.

Under the protection of the north porch, the faces of Henry II and Eleanor and their children are arranged in groups, on either side of the door: opposite them, the two crowned heads are likely to be those of young Henry (aged 17) and his wife Margaret (aged 18). Indeed, the entire sculpture may celebrate the events of 1172, when young Henry was made co-ruler, with his father, of the County of Anjou. (Young Henry and his wife had also been crowned co-rulers of England that same year: young Henry is sometimes called "The Young King" to distinguish him from his father, Henry II.) The other carvings show the faces of Richard (15) with his elder sister Matilda (16), and Geoffrey (14) and Eleanor (12). (Joanna (7) and John (5) are absent: they were brought up by the nuns of nearby Fontevrault Abbey until 1173). Even accepting that the faces will have been stylized, the overall impression is that of family harmony - or at least the public show of it.

#### Candes: private problems

Behind the façade, Henry II and Eleanor had been publicly estranged since the autumn of 1168, when Eleanor hired seven ships to carry her possessions across the English Channel. After a family Christmas at Argentan, Richard accompanied his mother to the court of the duchy of Aquitaine, in Poitiers. Most likely the marriage had foundered over Henry II's enthrallment with Rosamund Clifford. This affair probably started in the mid 1160's but quickly grew into a court scandal. Giraldus Cambrensis made his infamous, if catty, comment:

*"He [Henry II] who had long been a secret adulterer, now flaunted his paramour for all to see, not that Rose of the World (Rosa-mundi)..... but that Rose of Unchastity (Rosa-immundi)."*

There were rumours of a love child, but although the timing would fit with the birth-date of William Longsword (an acknowledged, illegitimate son), there is



nothing else to substantiate the claim. The liaison was cut short with the unexpected death of Rosamund –only aged 30 – in 1176: then as now, the conspiracy theorists were full of “sound and fury, signifying nothing”.

Equally, there is no written record of any discussions or negotiations that must have occurred between Henry II and Eleanor. Subsequent events suggest that Eleanor had the upper hand. The court at Poitiers was refurbished in preparation for her return in January 1169. That same month, Henry II announced his intention of dividing his empire between his three eldest sons: the eldest, young Henry taking Normandy and England, Richard to have Aquitaine and Geoffrey to take the Dukedom of Brittany. The king's words provoked a torrent of speculation from the chroniclers for this was the monarch who had said “*the whole world might be better off under the rule of one just and able man*”. Now this man was voluntarily dividing his empire.

For young Henry, it was as if he had left school and joined the board of directors. By the time of this sculpture at Candes, he had been crowned in England (twice, due to problems with Archbishop Thomas Becket) and become co-ruler of Anjou and Maine. His other brothers, Richard and Geoffrey, were equally pleased with their portion. Eleanor had established her political and personal independence, and her children's future looked secure. And Henry had given up his world for love. Small wonder that everyone appears happy and content: a golden family moment, full of promise for the future. Yet within a year, it had all gone.

### **Candes: public discord**

The young king, discovering that his father refused to loosen the purse strings, rapidly became disillusioned. He became even more annoyed when

his father promised several important castles to his youngest brother, John – castles in the heartland of Anjou. Richard and Geoffrey had also grown suspicious of their father's motives regarding John. By Easter 1173, first Richard and Geoffrey, and then young Henry, fled to the French royal court at Paris. (Eleanor attempted to join them later, but was apprehended and taken to England. Henry held her in close confinement until his death in 1189, although conditions were relaxed in later years and she appeared again in public from 1183.)

For the scheming French monarch, Louis VII, keen as ever to clip the wings of Henry II, the arrival of the princes was indeed “a royal flush”. Other nobles flocked to their standards: William of Angoulême, Guy and Geoffrey of Lusignan, and the counts of Flanders, Boulogne and Blois took up arms against Henry II and even made plans to invade England. In England itself, the earls of



The faces of Eleanor and Geoffrey



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### The ruined donjon of Clairvaux



Norfolk, Leicester, Chester and Derby publicly declared for the young king. William of Scotland, keen as ever to profit from the discomfiture of his neighbour, prepared to invade the north of England.

The resulting hostilities were mainly skirmishes and raids but ranged throughout the Plantagenet territories and over a period of two fighting seasons. Henry II found himself in double jeopardy, needing not only to rebuff his enemies but also to maintain credibility among his own supporters, in order to prevent their desertion. Despite the odds, Henry II was surprisingly successful and by the end of the second year (Sept 1174), all but his son, Richard had been worn

down or soundly thrashed.

The truce that was agreed, under the great elm at Gisor, resulted in a fragile, political peace. However, it did nothing to resolve the underlying family tensions and the next ten years were punctuated by tempers and tantrums. Initially the arguments raged across the generation gap - between Henry and his three eldest sons. However, as the boys became young men, Richard's natural abilities - particularly in the imposition of his ducal authority - singled him out and no doubt provoked comparisons with the young Henry and Geoffrey. Their jealousy was also fuelled by the barons of Aquitaine who were unused to such an efficient or interfering overlord as Richard. Young

Henry was more than susceptible to their flattery; Richard was aware that his tenure of Aquitaine was not entirely secure from his brother's ambition.

Sibling distrust hardened into fraternal hostility: at Clairvaux, their relationship became set in stone.

### Clairvaux: a beacon set on a hill

For the small band of knights that garrisoned the donjon (keep) of Clairvaux castle, the year 1182 marked a watershed. What had been a quiet rural backwater, north of Poitiers, became a noisy encampment inhabited by stone masons and carpenters. Within months, seven towers and a curtain wall had surrounded the central donjon. The fortification work was scarcely discreet: even the smallest tower was nearly 33m tall, and the entire structure was faced in brilliant white limestone. Dominating the skyline above the Envigne river

#### Brotherly love

Richard would have been aware that his great-grandfather, Henry I had fought his elder brother over the Duchy of Normandy and imprisoned him for twenty-eight years. Moreover, Henry II had reneged on a promise to his father that he would split the inheritance of Normandy, Anjou and England between himself and his two younger brothers.



The shrine of Rocamadour today

valley, the castle must have appeared incandescent in the sunshine: in ruins, it still dazzles the eye.

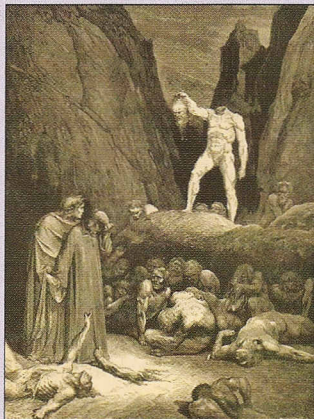
Clairvaux was one of several castles in a territorial "grey area" between the jurisdictions of Anjou and Poitou: the interface between young Henry and Richard respectively. In 1182, Richard clearly felt that his relationship with his elder brother was so unpredictable that he needed to fortify this northern marcher area, in order to protect his "back" while he dealt with the unruly barons of Aquitaine.

The building activity also caught the attention of Bertran de Born, a local troubadour and minor baron. Socially, he moved on the fringes of young Henry's circle of friends and also held a personal grudge against Richard. Sharpening his barbed tongue, he wrote:

*"Between Poitiers and Île Bouchard, between Mirebeau, Loudun and Chinon, at Clairvaux, someone has dared to build a fair castle, in the very centre of the plain. I would not wish the young king to know about it or get sight of it, for it would scarcely please him. But I fear he cannot but fail to see it, even from Mathefelon, showing so white on the horizon.."*

The young king did indeed fly into a tantrum when he heard the news: an appeal to their father was nearly settled by negotiation in his favour. However, in an ambitious move, Henry II tried to settle the sibling distrust permanently by requiring them to adhere to a pact of mutual perpetual peace. All went well until the moment of giving homage: Richard was required to give homage to young Henry in his capacity as the overlord of all the Plantagenet territories. The young king provoked his brother by demanding that Richard take his oath by swearing on the Gospels. The chronicler, Roger of Howden says "[Richard] returned in haste to his own territory and fortified his castles and towns."

Clairvaux fixed more than just the boundary between the territories – it

**Bertran de Born**

**Bertran de Born, as depicted by Dante.**

Bertran de Born was a poet, satirist and general scandalmonger, whose writings could be likened to the medieval equivalent of "Private Eye". Thirty-nine of his songs survived - more than any other troubadour - and became widely known as examples of early non-religious literature. His life story was known to Dante who, when writing his "Inferno" placed Bertran in the eighth circle of hell. There he prowls, the sower of discord, carrying his head by its hair like a lamp, as a symbol of his role in dividing father from son.

**Mathefelon**

Mathefelon was an ancient territory between Angers and Le Mans, at the very northern edge of Anjou, perhaps comparable to what "Wessex" represents in modern England. It was as if Bertran had seen the Tower of London from John O'Groats.



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The Carolingian bell of Rocamadour.

gave physical reality to the differences between the brothers.

### Clairvaux: brotherly differences

Young Henry seems to have inherited his grandfather's charm and good looks (Geoffrey of Anjou, nicknamed, le Bel). As a teenager, young Henry had become a fashion icon with all its attendant vanities – as a young man, he enjoyed the trappings of wealth and privilege that placed him on centre stage. He earned a nickname - Curtmantel (lit. short-cloak) – reflecting not only the length of his tunic but also his sense of style and panache. However, although he was excited by royal pomp and ceremony, he was bored by the process of government. His recurring complaint concerned his impoverished court, his beggarly allowance and his lack of financial independence. It was as if he would not understand the family business - only spend its profit. Indeed, he was renowned for his liberality, a generosity that flowed from his open nature and devotion to chivalry. He also tended to be a “now” person - concentrating only on the people of the moment and making him appear weak-willed and easily swayed. Yet somehow, his presence made people forget his inconsistencies - only Richard appeared immune to his charm. It is little

wonder therefore, that he was the only member of the Plantagenet royal family to hold sustained public popularity. If he had lived today, he would have been “the royal with the common touch” - a photogenic, people's prince.

In contrast, Richard, although just as chivalrous and artistically talented, was physically tough and mentally focused, especially when it involved warfare. Perhaps this made him rather one-dimensional but it was the basis for his more substantial epithet: Coeur de lion (lionhearted).

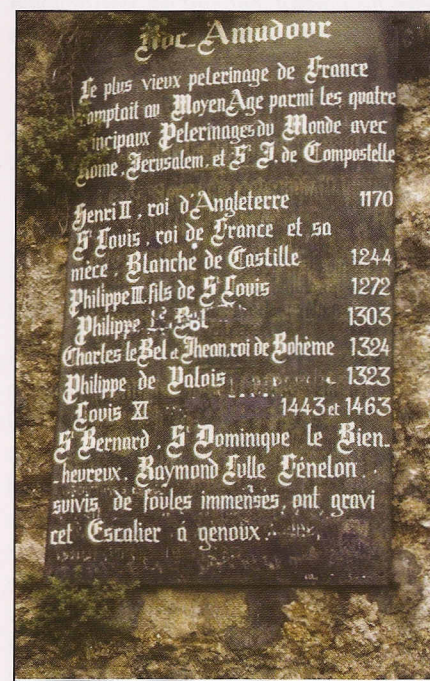
A sense of mutual mistrust had permeated the dealings between the brothers for many years. Henry II was often called upon to mediate. His actions were often inconsistent and inflammatory, although in reality, there was little he could do to remedy the situation. When the matter of Clairvaux was brought before him, Henry II appears to have been convinced of the reconciliation between his eldest sons - despite Richard's departure - and made a strategic blunder by sending young Henry to tell the Aquitaine barons of the new-found fraternity. It proved a costly mistake: Geoffrey had already joined forces with the barons and together they persuaded young Henry to renege on his promises and come with them to Limoges.

### Clairvaux: father and son

It was not long before Henry II arrived outside Limoges castle walls - only to be greeted by a hail of arrows from the castle walls. One arrow tore his cloak, while another killed an attendant. Henry withdrew to the safety of the bishop's palace, only to be visited later that day by young Henry who claimed that the assault had been unauthorised. It might all have ended in the usual tantrums and tears, if the young man had not refused an invitation to disarm and share an evening meal with his father. Such was his haste to return to his friends, that the opportunity passed leaving Henry II hurt and angry.

Henry II did make another attempt to negotiate with the rebels, but this time his horse received the arrow, having reared by chance and taken the bolt in the neck. Once more, the old king retired to the palace while the rebels made repeated sorties into the surrounding countryside, robbing monasteries and shrines to pay their mercenaries.

Meanwhile young Henry oscillated between his father and the rebel camp,



Henry II is the first on a long list of distinguished pilgrims.



**Durandel: a 'sword in the stone'!**

staying for long periods with both, in an effort to resolve his own dilemma. On one day he would lead a raid on a monastery; on the next, he could be found quietly reading amongst them. He sought escape from responsibility by first blaming Geoffrey and then vowing to take the Crusaders' cross. When he pleaded for his father's forgiveness, Henry II was torn between anger and sorrow. Sorrow triumphed, and young Henry, apparently resolved at last, promised to bring his former friends to sue for peace. However, when Henry II's men approached the castle to escort them, they were set upon and thrown in the moat. Henry II waited until the end of Lent and promptly besieged the castle. Young Henry remained inside with the rebels.

By the following month of May, news reached the besieged that reinforcements from Burgundy and Toulouse were closing in on the area. In order to create a diversion, young Henry led an armed party southward out of Limoges. They plundered shrines and monasteries, robbed the local inhabitants and eventually arrived at Rocamadour.



**Rocamadour:  
sanctity destroyed**

Nowadays, the shrine is a mere shadow of its former importance and splendour. It was centred round the miraculously preserved body of St Amadour, who had been discovered during 1166, in a cliff face tomb. (The body was destroyed during the Wars of Religion.) At some stage, a little statue of the Virgin Mary joined the saint in the newly build sanctuary and a ninth-century Carolingian iron bell was hung from the ceiling. Tradition claims that the bell rings spontaneously when sailors on the nearby Dordogne river invoke the help of the Virgin, or when the sanctuary itself is threatened. The legendary sword, Durandal still remains an additional attraction.

When young Henry arrived at its gate in 1183, Rocamadour had been established for less than twenty years. Henry II is listed as its first important pilgrim, visiting the site in the autumn of 1170, following a severe episode of illness that had brought him close to death. His patronage was probably responsible for its initial prosperity and young Henry may have felt entirely justified in reclaiming its wealth for his own use. Precious stones, gold and silver would have decorated both the shrine and the enamel casket containing the saintly relics. There would also have been the

monetary offerings from pilgrims, and the earnings of the busy commercial community that had developed around the shrine. It was inconceivable that any Christian knight would violate its sanctity, but young Henry ignored convention and removed everything: even the gems from the casket of St Amadour. Tradition says he also took Durandal and sold it for ready cash. (Whoever purchased it brought it back because today, it is impaled in the cliff face beyond the reach of anything less than a chamois!)

**Rocamadour: piety dismissed**

However, Rocamadour was more than a repository of Plantagenet generosity: Henry II had visited it as a result of his personal piety. By targeting these places, young Henry not only recycled the family gold but trampled on his father's spiritual values. If young Henry had hoped that his provocation would relieve the siege at Limoges, he had misjudged his father. At some point around Easter, Henry II had abandoned any lingering paternal hopes for his eldest son and instead, replaced them with a hard realism. Young Henry's actions at Rocamadour, his implied rejection of his father's spiritual values, only served to strengthen this resolve. The barrier between them had indeed become as insurmountable and unyielding as the

**Durandal**

A sword fabled to have once belonged to Hector of Troy, and associated with the death of Count Hruodland, at Roncesvalles (778AD). In time, the name "Hruodland" became "Roland" and the subject of the epic medieval poem, *The Song of Roland*.



**The image of Durandal remains a popular icon.**

Set in Stone



## A Family Conflict

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### The Maison Fabri with its central tower.



rock face of Rocamadour.

As young Henry rode away, there were those who claimed to hear the sombre tones of the ancient iron bell of Rocamadour. Was this its fabled ability to ring spontaneously when the shrine was threatened? To the people of that time, the tolling bell marked the years of a life departed: whatever they were doing, they would have stopped to listen and count - one ring for every year of life. Did it toll twenty-seven?

#### Mesnie

Mesnie (Lat. *Mansio* - household): the group of young military men who accompanied the young king, as both friends and protectors.

### Martel: the ring of truth

As young Henry rode back to towards Limoges, he contracted dysentery and became unwell. After crossing the Dordogne river, his *mesnie* took him to nearby Martel, an ancient walled town renowned for its seven towers.

There, they found accommodation in the Maison Fabri: it still stands on the southern aspect of the market place. Once things were settled, word of the young king's condition was sent to his father. However, Henry II suspected a ruse to lift the siege at Limoges and no doubt was now aware of the reinforcements from Burgundy and Toulouse. In addition, having personally received the very real "arrows of outrageous fortune" on two occasions, he had no intention of offering himself for a third pot-shot. Instead, he sent his commiserations, and a ring as a token of forgiveness. Further urgent messages were met by the same response.

By seventh June, the truth of the matter must have dawned on young Henry: for the first time in his life, he was on his own - and dying.

### Martel: pageant and penitence

It would not be unreasonable to suppose that his thoughts must have turned to his family and the recent events that made reconciliation impossible. He may have decided that although his family relationships were beyond redemption, there was a possibility that he might yet ensure his own Christian salvation. Certainly, he willingly participated in the solemn ceremonies that surrounded death in the middle ages. The bishop of Cahor and a local abbot were summoned to hear his private confession, as, in considerable discomfort, he prostrated himself naked on the floor before the bishop's crucifix. He begged forgiveness and received the sacrament. However, he was still troubled that he had taken the vows of a crusader so lightly. So he gave his cloak, with its stitched cross, into the care of his former tutor, William Marshal, and deputed him to take it to Jerusalem.

On the eleventh of June, he gathered his *mesnie* around him, made his public confession and last testament, and then received the last rites. Not content with that - whether driven by a sense of pageant or penitence - he had himself dressed in a hair shirt and laid on a bed



The plaque recording the death of young Henry in 1183.



A street sign in Martel.

of cinders with a stone pillow and a noose around his neck. Clasp the ring that his father had sent him, young Henry fell into a coma and died: he was not quite twenty-eight years old.

**Martel: touched by death**

Bertran de Born penned a matchless elegy that so moved Henry II that he re-instated Bertran at Hautefort castle (the basis of Bertran's grudge with Richard).

*If all the pain and misery and woe,  
The tears, the losses with misfortune  
fraught  
That in this dark life man can ever  
know,  
Were heaped together-all would seem  
as naught  
Against the death of the young English  
king;  
For by it youth and worth are sunk in  
gloom,  
And the world dark and dreary as the  
tomb,  
Reft of all joy, and full of grief and  
sadness....  
Bloodthirsty death, that bring'st us  
bitter woe!  
Well may'st thou boast, since that  
earth's noblest peer  
To thy dark realm a prisoner must go.*

*Rendered Ida Farnell,  
as found in "Richard the Lionheart" by  
Anthony Bridge*

Another contemporary wrote - perhaps with a greater sense of proportion:

*"rich, noble, lovable, eloquent,  
handsome, gallant, every way attractive,  
a little lower than the angels.....all these  
gifts he turned to the wrong side....a  
prodigy of unfaith, an unlovely palace  
of sin".*

Denied even the privacy of a royal palace, young Henry died on market day: amid the smells of the produce, the noise of livestock and the cries of the dealers. The townsfolk would have watched the



comings and goings of the messengers to the king, put up with the mercenaries that accompanied the young rebel and eventually received payment for their troubles from the hand of William Marshal, as the cortège left the safety of their walls.

Yet the death of the young king seems not only to have touched their pockets - it seems to have touched their hearts and their sense of history. Over eight hundred years later, young Henry's name is still remembered in Martel. La Place Henri Plantagenet is a small open area inside the walls in front of the main pedestrian gateway at the Tournemire Tower. There is a Rue Henri Court Mantel. Best of all, there is a plaque marking the Maison Fabri and recording his death.

**Set in stone**

Every generation is able to recall a memorable death: for us that might be John F Kennedy or the Princess of Wales. Every generation builds memorials: nowadays we seem to prefer flames, whether a living one at Arlington or a sculptured one at the Alma Tunnel,

Paris. Eight hundred years ago, fine stone effigies such as that at Rouen, were the symbol of earthly importance and heavenly aspiration.

Yet Candes, Clairvaux, Rocamadour, and Martel recall the story of young Henry as well: "ordinary" building stone that is no less emotive or enduring. For most, their involvement is almost serendipitous: only Clairvaux was built as a direct result of the family dispute. They remind us of the unchanging psychological nature of humanity: of fear and frustration, of hope and happiness.

We too may build for the future but, like the story of young Henry, we also leave our sensibilities set in stone.

**Janet P Gillespie**  
family doctor and writer

**Further reading**

W L Warren, *Henry II*, Methuen, London, 1991.  
David Crouch, *William Marshal*, Longman, London & New York, 1996.