

Richard I

(born 1157, ruled
1189–99)



Richard I, called the Lion-Hearted (Coeur de Lion), came to the throne in 1189. More than 6 feet (1.8 meters) in height, he was fair-haired and blue-eyed. As his nickname suggests, he was a splendid fighter. He was also a poet, and people loved to hear him sing, but as a king he was too careless about his duties to be called a great ruler.



Richard grew up under French rather than English influences. His parents, Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, were both of French birth and education. His father was the first Plantagenet king of England, but his possessions in France covered an area larger than all of England. French was Richard's native tongue, and almost all his life was spent in France. Even after he became king he made only two brief visits to England.



Richard the Lionheart

At the age of 15 Richard was formally placed in charge of his mother's duchy of Aquitaine in southern France. The next year he joined his brothers, aided by the French king, in a widespread but unsuccessful revolt against their father. He also engaged in struggles with his elder brother Henry and his younger brother John. The death of Henry in 1183 made Richard the next heir to the throne, to which he succeeded after the death of his father in 1189.





News of the recapture of Jerusalem by the Muslims, two years before, had stirred all of Europe, and great preparations were made for the Third Crusade. For Richard this proved to be the great undertaking of his life. He made a brief visit to England to be crowned and to collect money to finance his share in the crusade.

While there he made Hubert Walter chief officer of the crown. Hubert Walter governed better than Richard would have done and saved the throne for Richard when John plotted to seize it during his brother's absence.



Richard returned to the continent to complete his preparations. The English fleet sailed by way of Gibraltar to Marseilles, while Richard journeyed overland to the same port. He joined King Philip of France in Sicily, where they spent the winter and quarreled violently. Richard again detoured on the way to the Holy Land, this time to fight with the ruler of Cyprus. He finally joined Philip at the siege of Acre, which surrendered in July 1191.





Richard the Lionheart Makes a Sea Landing

Because of his military skill and courage, Richard was soon acknowledged as chief leader of the crusade. Before long King Philip returned to France, where he plotted against his rival. For more than a year Richard remained in Palestine. When he fell ill of fever it is said that his great opponent Saladin, the leader of the Muslims, sent him fruit and snow.



“He was brave,” says an Arab writer, “experienced in war, and fearless of death. If he had been alone among millions of enemies, he would not have declined battle; when he attacked there was no resisting.” Twice the crusaders were within two days' march of Jerusalem, but they were unable to take the city. At last Richard negotiated a three-year truce, under which the Christians might safely visit the Holy Sepulchre. He then sailed for home in October 1192.



While on the Crusade Richard had not only quarreled with Philip but had offended Leopold, duke of Austria. He had intended to sail to Marseilles, but he learned of a plot to seize him as soon as he reached the coast of France, so he landed instead at the head of the Adriatic Sea and then traveled overland in disguise. Betrayed when he reached Vienna, he was captured by Leopold in December 1192. Leopold turned him over to Henry VI, the Holy Roman emperor, who demanded a huge sum for his release.





Meanwhile in England Richard's brother John had been plotting with Philip to divide Richard's realm. John wanted the emperor to keep Richard prisoner, but Hubert Walter raised the money for his ransom and Richard was set free early in 1194. Richard hurried to England but stayed only long enough to raise more money for a new campaign in France.



Richard watches the massacre
From a 15th century illustration



He spent the remaining five years of his life fighting against Philip and building his castle, the Château Gaillard, in Normandy. While laying siege to a castle in southern France, he was hit by a crossbow bolt and died a few days later. His brother John succeeded him.



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Richard the Lionheart dying



RICHARD COEUR DE LION

Even in Richard's lifetime his adventures were the subject of song and story. An early French chronicle tells how Richard's faithful minstrel, Blondel, searched for his imprisoned king by standing under the windows of many castles and singing until he finally heard Richard reply. Richard was featured in two novels by the Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott—'Ivanhoe' and 'The Talisman'.



Statue of Richard the Lionheart outside the Houses of Parliament

